Rolling Stone
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ISSUE 016

AARON TAYLOR-JOHNSON

BRITAIN'S NEXT LEADING MAN

FUTURE OF MUSIC

MEET THE 25 ARTISTS SHAPING THE SOUNDS OF TOMORROW

RACHEL CHINOURIRI

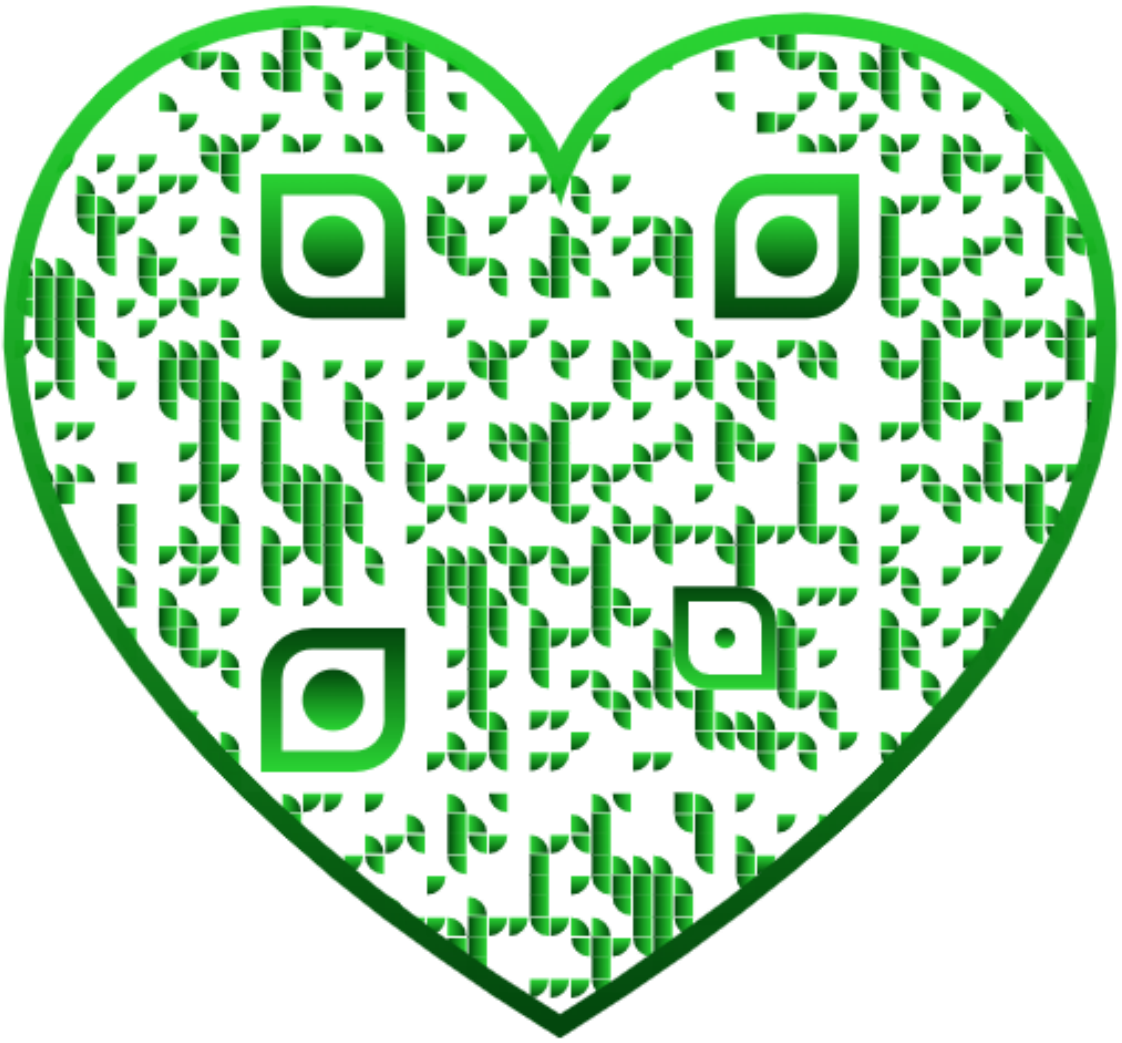
ON SHEDDING SADNESS TO DROP THE DEBUT INDIE ALBUM OF THE YEAR

VAMPIRE WEEKEND

HOW EZRA KOENIG LEARNED TO TAKE THINGS SLOW

+

FRA FEE
RUFUS SEWELL
KRISTEN STEWART
BARRY CAN'T SWIM
SHARLEEN SPITERI
VIVIAN OPARAH
BIG SPECIAL
WALT DISCO
LUCY ROSE
FLETCHER
ANITTA



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Aaron Taylor-Johnson

AARON WEARS LEATHER JACKET, **VINTAGE HELMUT LANG FROM NORDIC POETRY**, TOP BY **NANUSHKA**, MOTORCYCLE TROUSERS BY **BELSTAFF**, BOOTS BY **ANGRY ITCH FROM ROKIT**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Kosmas Pavlos**

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JACK ALEXANDER; EVA PENTEL

virgin atlantic
live the
high life
with mile high tea at 38,000ft

Contributors

Jack Alexander
Photographer

Music aside, I absolutely love the aesthetic of all of Rachel Chinouriri's album imagery, so going into the shoot I knew she would bring lots of personality.

I stuck a Tinashe playlist on, and the energy was just super fun and chilled. I had lots of pose references prepared, but we didn't need them — Rachel's confident and just knows how to move.

It feels like there's so much buzz about her right now, so it was exciting to work with her at this point. I feel like she's a name we'll be hearing a lot more of in the next year or so — especially since Adele recently shouted her out. I'm very much looking forward to seeing her blossom.

Eva Pentel
Photographer

For me, Vampire Weekend's 'A-Punk' was the soundtrack of my first Reading Festival, so to shoot Ezra Koenig was a nostalgic treat. That era of music when I was growing up is partly what inspired me to start taking photos: it was around then I realised if I had a camera I could get into gigs! This shoot was last-minute, and we didn't have long, but the images turned out really nicely. We shot in a suite at the Park Lane Hotel, and Ezra was lovely and great to photograph. I've wanted to shoot for Rolling Stone UK since the launch, so I was really happy to be asked.

Sophie Porter
Social media manager

Lack of opportunity and a premeditation of your life comes with the territory of growing up on a council estate. But, thanks to my parents, who filled our house with instruments and their collection of 2 Tone, punk and Northern Soul 7-inches, music became my lifeboat. I use the term "lifeboat" because it's how Steven Knight describes the importance of music in his new series, *This Town*. The themes and the soundtrack resonated on such a deep level. In common with the four lead characters, in my early teens I joined my first band as an avid ska listener in a bid to see and do more than what was set out for me. So, when the opportunity came to write this piece for Rolling Stone UK, it couldn't have been a more perfect fit. Thanks to the team for the opportunity, and to Steven Knight, Levi Brown and Jordan Bolger for sharing their backgrounds and love of music with me.

Will Richards
Senior writer

I'm absolutely delighted to be starting 2024 with a new full-time role as senior writer at Rolling Stone UK. Working on in-depth storytelling for such an iconic brand is a dream for me, and I'm honoured to have become part of the best team around.

For my first issue on staff, I was delighted to speak to Fra Fee about his multi-disciplinary talents on stage and screen, to chat to Vampire Weekend's Ezra Koenig about the band's psychedelic fifth album, and to interview Lucy Rose about the extraordinary and terrifying real-life experiences that led her to joyful new album, *This Ain't the Way You Go Out*. My greatest passion, though, is new music, so it was a particular joy to help select our Future of Music list for 2024 and to speak to Barry Can't Swim, a soon-to-be-star defining the UK's next wave of dance music. I can't wait to see him soar.

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Editor's Letter

My first time...

I remember the moment well. It was almost twenty years ago, and I was in the back seat of my cousin's car on the way back from a club. The radio was playing and the song 'Fuck Me Pumps' by Amy Winehouse came on. Anybody with a love of music has their own first time that they heard a song by a new artist that grabbed them by the ears and worked its way into their heart.

This was the first time I fell in love with not just Amy's voice, but her lyricism. We were all aware of the stereotypical "gold-digging" girl that Amy cut down in the song with such pointed, acerbic wit – you'd either seen them out on the lash or, gulp, knew one. There was a relatability in her voice and the words of that song – and beyond that, with the *Back to Black* album to come – which resonated with the listener. Stark, uncompromising honesty would become Winehouse's moniker.

In Amy, a new kind of British star was born. Her legacy changed British music, ushering in a new age of soul-baring female singer-songwriters. Amy tuned the world's ears to the likes of Adele, Jorja Smith and Olivia Dean that followed.

In this issue, with the debut of Rolling Stone's first global *Future of Music* lists, we aim to spotlight even more newly established or emerging artists that might capture your imagination for the first time as Amy did mine two decades ago. The editorial team at Rolling Stone UK have whittled down an extensive list of musicians, artists and producers that we think will shape tomorrow's music scene. These are the people who we believe are pushing boundaries outward and upward, redefining genre and creating bold new soundscapes.

Rolling Stone magazine is published in 12 territories around the world, from Korea to Australia and New Zealand via France and Argentina, and this month each publishes its own definitive list of 25 rising stars. With this UK edition we hope we are responsible for introducing you to at least one new favourite that will populate your playlists for years to come.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOSMAS PAVLOS

CREATIVE DIRECTION & STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

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Great Music knows no borders

From classic artists like The Beatles and Pink Floyd, to rising superstars including Dua Lipa, Harry Styles and Celeste – 1 in every 10 songs streamed around the world is by a UK artist. Just one example of how UK music unites fans globally, from Austria to Australia and Belgium to Brazil. Join us and see things differently.

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BENTLEY

Shine on

The maximalist, oversized sunglasses trend from the noughties is back. Versace has channelled the early 2000s with a sportier feel for their latest styles. The Italian brand's Medusa Horizon sunglasses keep things clean and sleek with elegant white and black frames, while the brand's heritage details, including the iconic Medusa hardware at the temple hinges and the designer's logo on the nose bridge, ensure that a little Versace drip shines through. Price: £292.

VERSACE.COM

WORDS & STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN; PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDDIE BLAGBROUGH; MODEL: JOAO AT IMG MODELS; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ELVIRE ROUX AT CAROL HAYES USING MERIT MAKEUP AND HAIR BY SAM MCKNIGHT; FASHION ASSISTANT: AARON PANDHER

Nothing matters

Building on the well-received launch of Nothing's flagship smartphone, the all-new Phone (2a) takes the product to the next level, pushing its engineering and craftsmanship even further for the optimum smartphone experience. The powerful processor boasts an extra-bright flexible AMOLED display for a fast and smooth experience, while an exceptional 50 MP dual rear camera powered by the brand's TrueLens Engine captures eight frames at different exposure levels in RAW format, before adjusting each pixel up to five times to display the most true-to-life result. Crucially, the Phone (2a) delivers up to two days of use on a full charge. Available in Black, White and Milk colourways, it's competitively priced to challenge the big smartphone brands at £319 (8GB/128GB) and £349 (12GB/256GB). In this case, Nothing really is everything.

NOTHING.TECH

Plug in and play

"It's not your average guitar shop — it's a place where musicians can go to get inspired," Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi has said of the new Gibson Garage London, a shop devoted to Gibson guitars and branded merchandise. Opened by the legendary Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, it is home to more than 300 electric and acoustic guitars, a custom guitar shop, and an event space. After 130 years of Gibson, it's designed to ignite a passion for music-making in a new generation of prospective guitar players, welcoming anyone at any point in their journey to turn up, plug in and play. In the words of Sir Brian May, "It's a new era in rock — and the twang is still the thang!"

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Coming up roses

Audemars Piguet has collaborated with haute couture designer Tamara Ralph to create a limited-edition timepiece. The Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Concept Flying Tourbillon "Tamara Ralph" 38.5mm watch comes in 18-carat pink gold, with graded lush tones of brown and bronze, as well as gold. To match the accessory's high-end shimmer, the campaign features an array of sparkling talent posing with the timepiece, including trailblazing K-pop star 2NE1's CL (pictured), to really bring out the star power of this special watch. Price on request.

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Then and now

From the glory days of the Haçienda to co-founding The Warehouse Project and Parklife Festival, Sacha Lord has been at the forefront of Manchester's music scene for the past 30 years. His new book, *Tales from the Dance Floor*, tells sweat-stained stories about some of the most iconic venues in the UK, tracing changes in nightlife culture, brushes with criminal gangs, and the past, present and future of Manchester. Lord — also the night-time economy advisor to Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham — uses the book to address existential threats to the UK's live music scene, making *Tales from the Dance Floor* a manifesto of how to tackle the future as well as a misty-eyed look into the past. Published by HarperCollins, the book will be on sale from 11 April.

Super sonic

Small but mighty, Sony's WF-1000XM5 wireless headphones pack a lot of power. Using cutting-edge science for premium sound quality and the best noise-cancelling technology, they're a dream proposition for musicians like American singer-songwriter Miguel (pictured), who fronts the campaign, and DJ Prospa, who have found the WF-1000XM5s indispensable when they're working on new music. To put it simply, they're perfect for tuning out the noise and getting in the zone. Price: £229.

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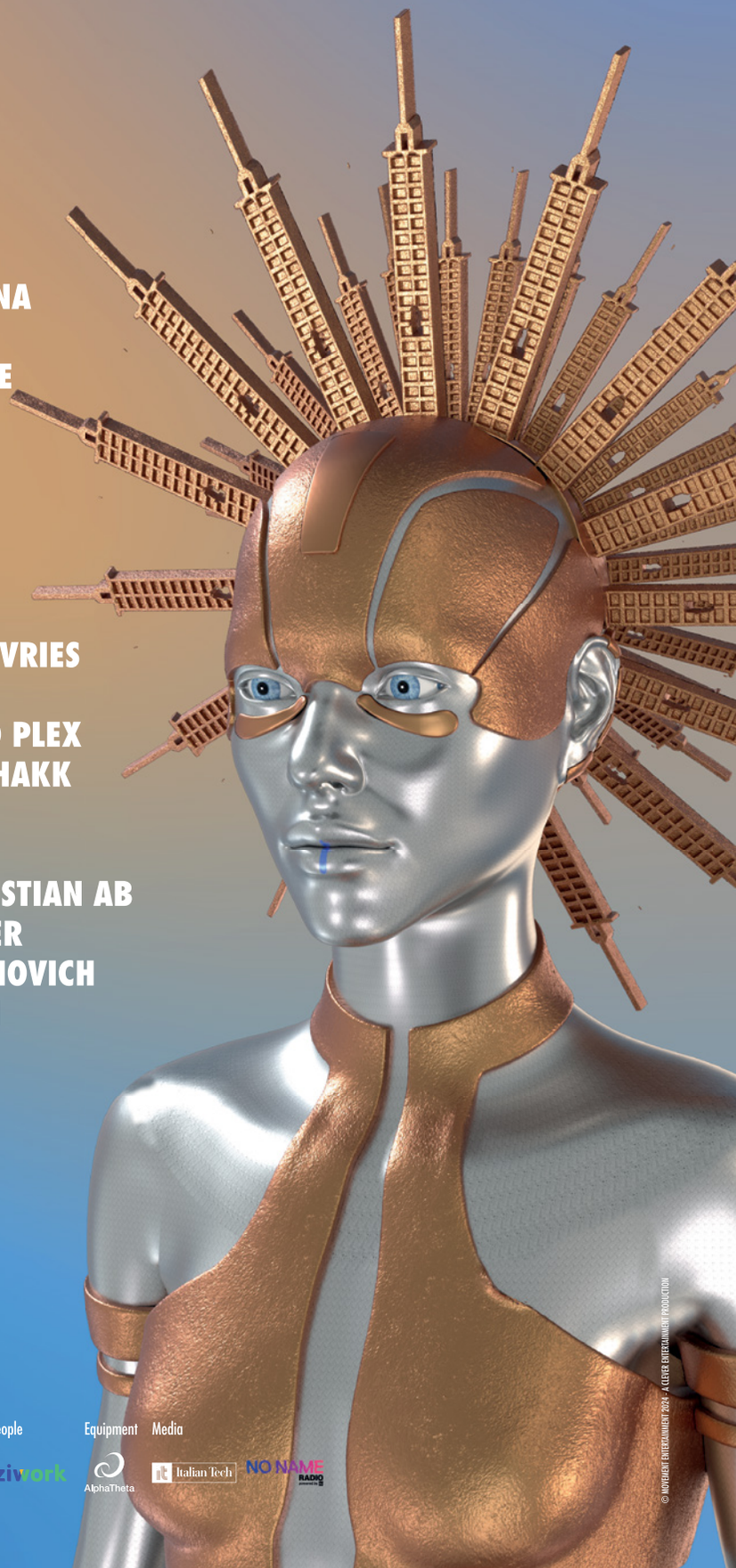

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WH

Choosing joy over sorrow

Lucy Rose discusses her upbeat fifth album, This Ain't The Way You Go Out, *and the terrifying rare illness it was borne from*

→

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Dom Sesto**

"I NEVER REALLY KNOW how I'm going to be able to talk about this stuff," Lucy Rose says at the kitchen table of her Brighton home. Ostensibly, I'm here to talk to the singer about her fantastic fifth album, *This Ain't the Way You Go Out*, but none of it makes sense without the context of the life-changing and medically mystifying experience that was its catalyst.

After her tour behind 2019 album *No Words Left* finished almost exactly at the start of the pandemic, the singer planned to take an extended period of time off, during which she became pregnant.

Five weeks after she gave birth to her first child in the summer of 2021, Rose began experiencing debilitating back pain, which she was told can be common for new mothers. With the pain continuing to worsen and doctors shrugging off her questions, Rose paid for an MRI scan that revealed she had fractured eight vertebrae and was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of pregnancy-related osteoporosis. A bone density scan was then undertaken. With severe osteoporosis indicated by a score of between -2 and -4, Rose's result was -4.4. The condition – a weakening of the bones – is most common in women in their 60s and 70s; Rose's diagnosis came at 32.

As we talk, she speaks carefully and deeply about the experience, quick to stress that this isn't a sob story, more one of defiance and often joy. After receiving the diagnosis, Rose attended hydrotherapy sessions and was put in contact with a Facebook support group accessed by women of all ages with the condition. "There's a few hundred on there, and it was started by a lady in Australia," she says, adding that she was also put in touch with an elderly volunteer via the Royal Osteoporosis Society (ROS). "Those two things became probably the most important lifelines for me," Rose reflects. She and the volunteer remain in touch, with plans to meet in person soon.

Even before this life-changing diagnosis, happiness and lightness was something Rose knew she needed to grasp when creating new music. The writing and touring of *No Words Left* – a sombre album defined by sorrow – had left her on her knees and in need of an extended break. "Pouring myself into it the way I did made me realise I couldn't do it again," she reflects. "I couldn't make another record that's so hard to perform. It's that really raw part of me, and just full of pain.

"I never talked about what that was about, ever," she adds, before pausing. "I can talk about it now for the first time, because we're in this conversation. I suffered from a miscarriage, and it really, really broke me for a long time. I wasn't able to talk about it, and I didn't want to talk about it on that album campaign in any capacity."

After slowly recovering and learning to live with her osteoporosis at home, Rose began sitting at the piano for very brief intervals with her son on her lap for as long as her back would allow. "It was about playing things that felt good, and wanting to be able to entertain a baby," she remembers. "He'd be smashing around on the keys, having the best time. There's no way I'd see that and then say to him, 'Hey, let me show you this really sad minor chord!'"

As her recovery continued, Rose invited her drummer and bassist down to her house for living-room jam sessions, where the improvisational and elated feel of her first ideas was furthered. Calling in a favour from five years ago to use Paul Weller's studio, Rose then brought her band and producer Kwes to the Surrey location, where they laid down the 12 songs on the album in two days – six per day, all tracked live. "If anyone is remixing these songs and asking, 'What's the BPM?' No idea! It's completely freeform."

This instinctiveness and positivity flows throughout *This Ain't the Way You Go Out*, a record inspired by the jazz and instrumental funk that Rose was listening to as her movement slowly returned. Its first single, 'Can You Help Me', shuffles along with a jubilant energy, while 'The Racket' has a shaggy and loose feel.

While the joy of these sessions and the album that came from them still radiates from Rose, she has to take life slowly and be careful not to exacerbate her condition. As a result, any touring behind the album will be extremely limited. She also shares her concern at the closure of the volunteer-run arm of the Royal Osteoporosis Society, who her husband had raised significant money for by running an ultramarathon. "I had a two-hour Zoom with someone from the charity, and I said, 'What's going on? Why are you closing this?'" Rose recalls. "I was completely isolated, and this was my only lifeline. It's unimaginable to think about another woman going through what I went through in an even worse place."

The lack of wider knowledge also worries her. Osteoporosis is found almost exclusively in postmenopausal women, and the bone-stabilising drug often offered as treatment comes with the side-effect of infertility. "I asked them that question when I was offered the drug at the hospital, only because I was told about the side-effect through the volunteer," Rose says, who was eventually offered an alternative drug. "If I'd hadn't had that knowledge, I would have been put on a drug that meant I couldn't have children ever again."

After sharing her story in a *Guardian* interview, Rose was approached by the ROS and told that plans are in place for a new peer support programme. "I'm hoping that by me saying more stuff, it will mean they don't shut the service down," she says. "It's very rare, but there are more of us living with this than people think."

Alongside an anger at the underfunding of vital services and her unnecessarily prolonged journey to an official diagnosis, Rose carries with her a new defiance and determination. "My relationship with my body has gone through so many twists," she says. "When this happened, I really had so much hatred for my body letting me down like this, and not enabling me to be the mother I wanted to be. It was heartbreaking and really traumatic, and I saw my body as this terrible thing."

Through therapy, music and the passing of time, Rose says her feelings about her body and her recovery "went full circle", which she addresses in the album's title track. "I wrote a song to apologise to my body and say how brilliant I think you are, because you got through it. You got *me* through it. You healed. You kept getting out of bed every day even though you were in excruciating pain. Instead of 'poor me', it's now more 'proud me'," she says warmly, breaking into a smile. "Yeah, that's how I feel."

WILL RICHARDS

REFRAMING PAIN
Battling with her health has made Rose determined

"I couldn't make another record that's so hard to perform. I suffered from a miscarriage, and it really, really broke me for a long time"

DOM SESTO; (ABOVE, INSET): JOSH SHINNER

RS RECOMMENDS

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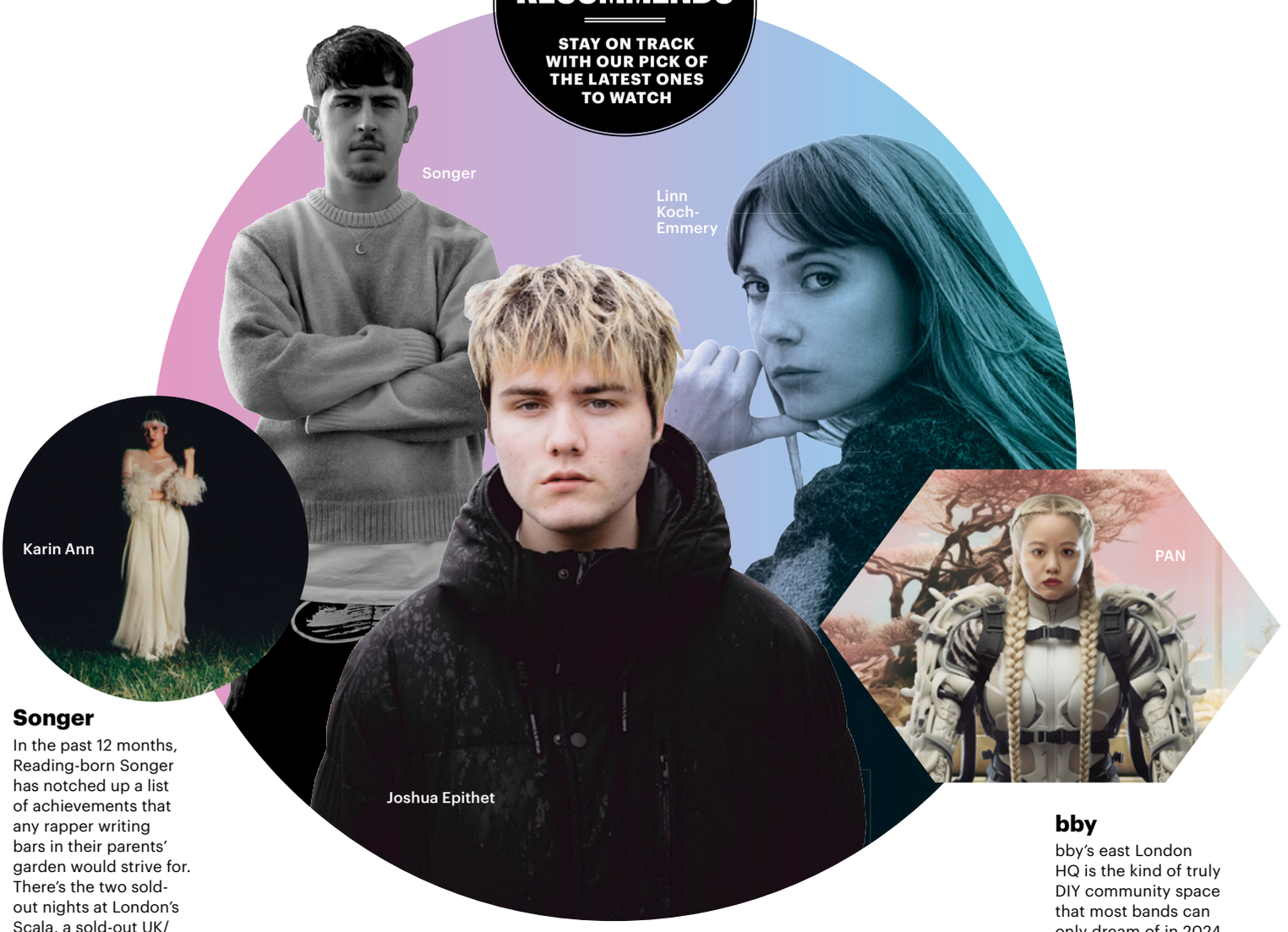

Songer

In the past 12 months, Reading-born Songer has notched up a list of achievements that any rapper writing bars in their parents' garden would strive for. There's the two sold-out nights at London's Scala, a sold-out UK/Europe headline tour and an album that went to number one in the hip-hop charts. That's before we get onto his take on Britney Spears' 'Toxic', which featured D Double E and hit the UK Top 40 after going viral on TikTok. Expect more of the same in 2024.

Linn Koch-Emmery

Rising indie star Linn Koch-Emmery deals in heartfelt, soul-baring confessionals that have already attracted the attention of Pete Robertson — known for both his work with The Vaccines and production for the likes of Beabadoobee, Clairo and Orla Gartland. Recent track 'Ebay Armour' is a powerful reflection of what Emmery is all about.

Joshua Epithet

The hallmark of this 21-year-old's work is hazy, lo-fi tunes that offer relaxing soundscapes before packing the most unexpected of punches. 'Cannibal', a stand-out track of his, is a blind-siding reflection on the concepts of consumption and the all-encompassing power of love, for better or worse.

Karin Ann

It's hard to shake the sense that Karin Ann is at the start of something special. At the age of just 21, she's scored 11 million streams and secured support slots with stadium-fillers such as My Chemical Romance and Imagine Dragons. Her output for 2024 sees the Slovakian star leaning into bedroom pop and no doubt one step closer to playing those aforementioned stadiums in her own right.

PAN

While the artist now called PAN might not ring too many bells, there's a fair chance you'll be acquainted with her previous guise as Aristophanes and the collabs with Grimes that she enjoyed. Now, she's at the start of a new era with a fresh name and tunes to match. Released on Transgressive, her recent EP, appropriately called *Reborn*, marks the bold and bright start of that era.

MRCY

New Dead Oceans signing MRCY met online during the pandemic when producer Barney Lister discovered vocalist Kojo Degraft-Johnson singing on Instagram. The smooth and softly experimental soul music the duo make together is proof of a rare musical chemistry. Lister's warm, full-bodied instrumentals are the perfect foil to Degraft-Johnson's honeyed vocals.

HONESTY

Members of new Partisan Records signings HONESTY have their roots in post-punk bands of the 2010s, but their new project is closer to 'Kid A'-era Radiohead. Debut EP *WHERE R U* is rooted in dark electronic fog, with comparisons to Burial feeling apt, but there are pop sensibilities here too.

The Chisel

The Chisel have been floating around the UK hardcore scene for a while now but make their big step up with new album *What a Fucking Nightmare*. Across 16 tracks, they channel hardcore, punk, Oi! and beyond with buckets of melody and righteous anger.

bby

bby's east London HQ is the kind of truly DIY community space that most bands can only dream of in 2024. In it, the five-piece make energetic and sprightly indie pop, as well as host chaotic weekly live shows for select fans. It's a rare and welcome story of a new band who gear everything towards IRL experiences.

Chalk

Belfast's Chalk toe a thrilling line between post-punk and electronic noise, pushing the boundaries of both and creating a cacophonous sound. New EP *Conditions II*, out via Nice Swan, is funky in parts, while others fall down a slippery slope towards discordant chaos. The offspring of the British post-punk revolution continue to thrill and innovate.

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Q&A

Success story

Vivian Oparah, BAFTA-nominated actress and star of Rye Lane *and* Dead Hot*, on storytelling, music, and why she wants to play the Joker*

By ALASTAIR JAMES

VIVIAN OPARAH IS the very definition of a rising star. After making her debut in 2016 in the *Doctor Who* spinoff *Class*, Oparah had turns in shows like *The Rebel* and *I May Destroy You*. Last year, she made a memorable splash in the romcom *Rye Lane*, before going on to appear in *Then You Run* and, most recently, in the comedy thriller *Dead Hot*, which is available to stream on Prime Video. Her performance as the effervescent Yas in *Rye Lane* earned Oparah a Leading Actress nomination at the 2024 BAFTA Film Awards, with her name included alongside actresses such as Emma Stone and Margot Robbie. As a member of the BAFTA Breakthrough class of 2023, and as a musician as well as a storyteller, Oparah is definitely about to become a household name.

Where does your love of storytelling come from?

My love of storytelling definitely feels innate. I'm Nigerian, and Nigerians are natural storytellers. I watched how storytelling would animate my otherwise stoic dad. My mum would tell the most zany, grandiose, Tim Burton-esque stories when I was a kid, so I guess I'm mirroring that.

What kinds of stories do you want to tell?

It sounds really cliche, but stories with complex characters who we don't pity, and stories that are psychological. But always stories that are fun and innovative.

Do you think you'll focus on intimate, real, human stories like *Rye Lane*, or can you imagine stepping into some fantastical world?

I can definitely see myself stepping into more fantastical worlds like the ones Yorgos Lanthimos creates. They still feel super grounded. I'd step into a *Star Wars*-like universe because I'm a sci-fi and fantasy geek at heart. But I also enjoy the intimacy of human-to-human connection and grounded, quiet stories.

What do you make of the response to *Rye Lane*?

It's been overwhelming. As an actor, you make something, and you immediately detach because you don't know what's going to happen to it in the edit. To have made something which seems to have captured a time in Peckham, which is important to the community that live there, that response in particular has been incredible. To have made a capsule of that awkward, slightly cringe-worthy, but ultimately heart-warming, getting-to-know-you stage of love feels lovely. It's pretty funny because I'm not romantic at all.

How did it feel to be nominated for Leading Actress at the BAFTAs?

Absolutely surreal. Fantasia Barrino, Emma Stone, Margot Robbie, Sandra Hüller and Carey Mulligan, those women are juggernauts when it comes to acting. To be even mentioned in the same sentence as them is insane.

Who gave you the best reaction to that news?

My mum. I told her I'd been nominated alongside Barbie. She was like, "But you are Barbie!" That's my forever cheerleader. I FaceTimed one of my best friends who was with my two other best friends. They were all crying on the floor in the gym. I wondered what people must have thought they received a call about.

You're also part of BAFTA Breakthrough 2023. How does that feel?

Incredible! You get a lot of opportunities and moments in your career, but you don't quite know how to harness them. Having an institution like BAFTA to shepherd me through these changes feels super special. I feel really lucky to be part of a diverse cohort of talent. And I'm super excited to follow in the footsteps of such wonderful talent.

Who inspires you?

Worldbuilders. Virgil Abloh was a huge inspiration of mine. So was Maison Margiela. Björk, another incredible worldbuilder. The Paul Thomas Andersons of this world. Jordan Peele. Tyler, the Creator just did a capsule collection for Louis Vuitton. His ability to distil his personal essence into everything he does and down to the most minute detail is something that I want to be able to do.

What's your all-time favourite performance?

Oh, God! Jodie Comer in *Killing Eve* season one. Athletic acting, chameleonic – like, she did everything. She was so funny. The dramatic acting, there was so much whimsy, the accents. How much she's in that show, holding it. Obsessed.

Who else are you excited for people to know about? Who's up and coming?

One of my friends who I starred in *Then You Run* with. Her name is Isidora Fairhurst. I think she's one of the most incredible actors I've ever met in my life. Also, an amazing singer.

Do you have any ambitions to step behind the camera?

I do. I've been writing a lot. Stories were my first love. Maybe directing when I get a little bit older. I'm still a baby.

You've mentioned wanting to play the Joker. Why?

I'm obsessed with Heath Ledger's performance. But I feel like playing a heightened comic-book villain who somehow still feels normal, but has the weirdest physicality, would be a real challenge. I'm often described as 'the Trickster', like, that's my archetype. So, I think I could slip into it really well.

You released a song 'FOUL' last year. Do you have plans for more music as Vivian Forever?

Yes, I'm finding the time to make it. Music's been more of an anchor for me the past year than something I'm working on career-wise. The dream is to write, star in and do the score for a film. We'll see how that all pans out.

You had plans to study neuroscience, but began acting instead. Do you ever think about what life would be like if you had gone ahead with that?

I feel like, somehow, I'm doing it. I feel like acting is an exploration of the mind in a more creative way. It would have been an exploration of the mind in a very clinical way.

What's the best career lesson you've learnt?

You cannot predict anything. You put your heart into it, and then you leave. Don't try to control the outcome. And actually, the less you do, the better it gets. ®

BAFTA/VIVEK VADOLIYA

Why this might be Ariana Grande's boldest era yet

The pop star is gloriously unpredictable – and it feels like she wants to play in a historic league with stars like Madonna

ROB SHEFFIELD
SOUND AND VISION

ARIANA GRANDE has built such a mighty pop legacy over the past decade as one of the most consistently kicky hitmakers around – but also as one of the weirdest minds in the game. 'Yes, And?' is her number one comeback, a disco rage-queen anthem that raises expectations for her long-awaited return, *Eternal Sunshine*. It's a brilliantly nasty manifesto to kick off the new Ariana era. She's just hit her thirties, wrapping up her Saturn return, and she's making music after a four-year layoff. But she's got some nonholistic shit to talk about to anyone gossiping about her between albums. "*Don't comment on my body, do not reply*," Ari sneers. "*Your business is yours and mine is mine / Why do you care so much whose dick I ride?*"

Madonna, one of Grande's idols, is the guiding spirit of 'Yes, And?', which rides a 'Vogue'-style house beat. It's a clever salute to the queen, who invented this power move of reminding people how controversial you are by complaining how controversial you are. But it's also a spiritually perfect shout-out at a pivotal time for Grande. She's 30, around the age when Madonna made her big move into the future with *Like a Prayer*, the album that catapulted her into one of the most dizzyingly brilliant thirties any pop artist ever had. So for Grande to invoke 'Vogue', right from Madonna's change-of-decade moment, feels like a bold statement about her ambitions – she wants to play in that historic league. Thirtysomething Madonna had it both ways: sophisticated mega-pop depth and disco bombast. Why shouldn't Ariana?

The stakes are high for *Eternal Sunshine*. Grande set the tone by posting a credo for the new year. "I've never felt more at the mercy of and in acceptance of what life was screaming to teach me," she wrote. Life has been screaming so much wisdom at Ariana, and she's finally ready to share. After four years, she's got a lot to prove.

Grande has always been gloriously unpredictable. When she first made her bones as a real-deal star, it was 10 years ago with her 2014 breakout hit, 'Problem', and her album *My Everything*. But she came on like a trash-talking kid playing grown-up. Everything about her seemed hyperbolically over the top: her Bardot ponytail, her mini-Mariah pipes, her mascara-dripping eye rolls, her perpetually bored scowl of teen contempt. Ten years down the line, she's proved she'll try anything for kicks. She does glossy ballads, Euro-sleaze dance bangers, hip-hop sex rants, trap *Sound of Music* – but it all sounds like her. She broke up with Pete Davidson, rushed out a quickie called 'Thank U, Next', and shocked everyone with one of the decade's most indelible classics.

Eternal Sunshine is her first new music since her 2020 banger, *Positions*, the ultimate pandemic-era perv-disco concept album about quarantine madness: a couple locked in the house together so long there's nothing to do but destroy the furniture in a nature-is-healing sex frenzy. Future historians will pair *Positions* with *Folklore* as the yin and yang of lockdown culture, two experimental pop classics lost in cabin fever. *Positions* holds up insanely well. But it's been a long stretch since the '34+35' days. "*You such a dream come true, true / Make a bitch wanna hit snooze, ooh*" – those were different times.

Her snooze era was a surprisingly long break for any pop star these days, but especially for Grande, after her bang-bang-bang prolific run of *Sweetener*, *Thank U, Next*, and *Positions*. The faster she worked, the more off-the-dome and eccentric she went, the higher she peaked; her best-loved moments came when she talked her shit and hit send before anyone had time to talk her out of it. But in her years away, her only new music was occasional cameos on other people's remixes, while filming the upcoming *Wicked* movies, starring as Glinda. She also made headlines with her marriage, divorce and on-set romance with co-star Ethan Slater, which gets her rage going on 'Yes, And?'.

In case anyone forgot those scandals, it's a clever move to kick off her *Eternal Sunshine* era with a lead single giving a "previously on Ariana" recap. She's always had her own flair for surfing her way through the tabloid headlines – that's how we got 'Thank U, Next', where she turned what could have been the pettiest celebrity shade into a genuinely moving pop life-coach lesson. But this woman always knows how to embrace controversy, going all the way back to the most iconic crisis of her career, her legendary doughnut-licking scandal of 2015, when she outraged a nation by getting rowdy in a late-night bakery, tasting the goodies and saying, "I hate America." It was the power move of a true havoc queen.

Eternal Sunshine takes its title from the 2004 Michel Gondry drama about a heartbroken couple who can only move on by getting each other's lives medically erased from their brains. It suggests Ariana has got some bittersweet memories to purge. She teams up with longtime collaborators Max Martin and Ilya Salmanzadeh, a symbolic full-circle moment, since they were on hand for her coronation with 'Problem' and *My Everything* a decade ago. Entering their thirties is often a moment when pop queens get introspective and decide to make their boldest marks on history – Carole King on *Tapestry*, Janet Jackson on *The Velvet Rope*, Taylor Swift on *Lover*, and, of course, Madonna going full-blast into Damn Right I'm Expressing Myself Thanks for Asking mode. So it's a huge moment for Ariana. Over her amazing past decade, she's explored pretty much everywhere. But *Eternal Sunshine* is where she shows the world where she's ready to go next. ®

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TV

When the party (prince) is over

Rufus Sewell on the subtle complexities of bringing Prince Andrew to life on screen in* Scoop*, the upcoming Netflix drama about his infamous* Newsnight *interview with Emily Maitlis

By CLIFF JOANNOU

NINE YEARS AFTER Prince Andrew was photographed in New York with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, the royal joined *Newsnight* in 2019 for a 'car crash' interview of epic proportions.

In *Scoop*, Netflix brings to the screen the story behind the interview, with exceptional lead performances that mirror the awkward tension of the original *Newsnight* interview.

Rufus Sewell plays Andrew, while Gillian Anderson is BBC journalist Emily Maitlis, who challenges him on his dubious connections with child sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell as well as Epstein – whom the prince continued to visit despite Epstein's first conviction. It's a masterful pairing that sees Sewell and Anderson recreate in unnerving detail the interview that would see the prince step down from Royal duties.

You and Gillian Anderson inhabit your roles so powerfully. What were your thoughts when you were first offered the role?

For me, this was a chance to do the kind of thing that actually maybe people don't know that I can. And so, I said yes. Then I had a few months to think, 'What the fuck have I just said yes to,' because I sat down to look at the interview again, which I remembered watching at the time, and realised that though I felt I knew how I could inhabit it, it wasn't going to do itself. I had to do a lot of work to look like Andrew, sound like him and get behind the thoughts and gestures, from my perspective. It could only ever be my perspective.

Anderson as Emily Maitlis

I obsessed about the interview, and I worked on it and worked on it. I would physically disguise myself even to work on it on my own, so I could suspend disbelief about myself. I'd dull down my eyebrows and grease my hair and I'd pad myself out, and just walk around in the shape of it. Slowly, it started to get closer and closer to something that felt right. And I did that work for a very, very long time.

Then, on the first day of filming, sitting opposite Gillian as Maitlis, I realised that she had done her own version of that. I was

astonished by how accurately she portrayed the other character that I had been subconsciously studying the whole time, because it was terrifyingly familiar and similar. And it was the one part that had been missing from my prep – that laser-like focus on me.

Was there any discussion or preparation with Gillian?

I like to work with what an actor gives me. I'm a big fan of Gillian's. It was just a treat. I mean, she made it very difficult for Andrew, and therefore easier for me to play the part, because she had the uncanniness of what she was doing to what I had studied. I really, really felt like I was in the hot seat. And luckily, I'd done enough work that what that brought out in me was more Andrew-like.

But no, there wasn't. I think very much the idea was to have that initial meeting, because that's what it really was, apart from a brief consultation that the characters had before, that was the time they really met. They didn't get much of a gauge on each other until that time. If we ever did a run-through, we'd always do it half-energy, because you don't want anything special to happen when it's not filming.

What were your concerns taking on the role?

What I want to do as an actor is that your loyalty is to the truth of the character. You want to represent that, warts and all, which is actually the easy part. The tricky part with certain characters is trying to give the non-warts and even the elements of a character that might be less unattractive, more charming, equal light. You're not there to rehabilitate, you're not there to condemn, but merely to offer up and try to come up with something that you believe as an interior monologue makes sense to themselves in that moment. And I could see what I thought all of those things were, by watching him closely.

I know from experience and from hanging out with other human beings in my life that it is possible to mix guilt with feelings of victimisation. Anyone who's ever been in a relationship has had to deal with various levels of culpability and versions of apology and stuff. We're all capable of it. It seemed to me like an extreme case, but then I had a duty to kind of fairly represent him. And that doesn't mean to try to make people like him. That's quite scary, because you don't want to be accused of trying to rehabilitate someone or show that they're nice or show it from their side. Walking that line is very, very difficult. But in the end, you've just got to do what you think is truthful.

It's an interesting journey that we go on as a viewer, because it goes from horror and shock and disgust to almost comical in some respects. But it's all so horrendous, because of the circumstances.

I know, I know. But that's life. And one of the things about being able to watch it embodied by other people makes you able to observe it with a slightly more distanced eye.

As a parent, what was the most uncomfortable situation that you found yourself speaking about in the scene?

My discomfort has to be different from Andrew's discomfort. So much of his discomfort is about having to disguise the fact that he feels betrayed and wounded and afraid. Though I can't speak with any authority, I believe the fact that he feels tremendous guilt about certain things but also a tremendous sense of victimisation.

One of the things that was most interesting is how often he was telling the truth. And a lot of what he's trying to do is re-explain. There's a lot of misdirected truths there. So you can say for example, "I have no memory of someone."

"I had a duty to fairly represent him ... But in the end, you've just got to do what you think is truthful"

IN THE HOT SEAT Sewell and Anderson recreate the interview right down to the clothes Andrew and Maitlis were wearing

And that might be true, but not for a good reason.

I haven't made any final judgements about him as a person when I'm doing it. My feelings of distaste and horror about things that he may or may not be guilty of and my own personal feelings in the performance are quite clear. But I'd rather my performance speak for me.

Have you made peace with the fact that you're not going to be offered an honour now?

[*Laughs*] I came to peace with that a long time ago. So, I may as well play Andrew.

NETFLIX

MUSIC

Fletcher almost lost it all

Illness brought her rock-star lifestyle to a halt. Now, she's healing in more ways than one

By WAISS ARAMESH

CARI FLETCHER KNEW something was wrong. After finishing a series of shows in the spring of 2023, she felt deeply run down – and it wasn't just the usual aches and pains of life on the road. The singer, who performs as Fletcher, went to the doctor and learned she had Lyme disease, a bacterial infection that can cause debilitating fatigue and neurological complications. It can also result in inflammation and damage to the nerves in the voice box – meaning Fletcher was faced with the terrifying prospect of being left permanently unable to sing. "There were many, many, many moments over the last year where I was not sure if I was going to return to music," Fletcher, who has just turned 30, says.

By the time she was diagnosed, Fletcher had established herself as one of pop's most versatile stars. She can pen a heartbreak ballad or craft a raucous dance hit. She doesn't shy away from the controversial or the confessional – this is an artist who made music videos for an EP titled *The S(ex) Tapes*, with the ex-girlfriend the EP was about. She can talk spicy ("*I just had sex with my ex / In a New York apartment / Ooh, I thought it'd be harmless*)" and be the topic of conversation up and down your For You Page. Suddenly, she worried it might all be over.

Fletcher shared her diagnosis on social media and postponed some overseas dates. Marquee letters came down. Comments sections went quiet. Fletcher became a recluse. "I noticed all the other things that got really loud in the time that I got really quiet, and it was the darkness that was in my own mind," she says. "I had to sit with 'Who am I without the applause? Who am I without the analytics and the numbers?' It brought a lot to the surface about self-worth and my beliefs and my gifts and my talents."

Fletcher, who was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and raised on Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen, moved back home for treatment, posting up in her childhood bedroom. A typical day for her this past summer started with a hot-girl walk by the soccer fields on which she grew up playing; maybe a bike ride by the inlet; some meditation, some journalling, and a lot of checking in on how her body was feeling.

As she slowly got better, she packed her complicated feelings into an album that comes from Cari, the person, as much as Fletcher, the pop star. *In Search of the Antidote* is an ode to all of the forms of healing Fletcher has gone through in the past 12 months. "My mum would cook us spaghetti and meatballs," she says of being back in Jersey. "We'd go home, have some pasta, and shoot back over to the studio to keep creating."

"I had to sit with 'Who am I without the applause? Who am I without the analytics and the numbers?'"

The artist known for singing about her rock-star lifestyle and heartbreak-numbing libations now has a different focus and aura. The day after the Grammys, Fletcher sits at a booth in a café behind the Hollywood Hills sipping a peppermint tea, manifesting a nomination for herself in the future, and reflecting on some of the most vulnerable times in her life. *In Search of the Antidote* is full of raw emotion, teetering between extreme confidence and despair. On the album's scalding, sarcastic opener, Fletcher wonders if she's ruining her life by lashing out at everything she loves; on the warm, breezy closer, she finds a sense of peace. Crisp ballads and alt-pop-punk "bops" (her words) come in between.

The focus is healing, but it's not all love and light. There's still a healthy dose of mess. On 'Doing Better', Fletcher sings about an ex's new girlfriend, who was also the focus of her 2022 hit 'Becky's So Hot'. The singer kicks off the second verse of the new song with, "*Your girlfriend never thanked me /*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Jessica Lehrman**

For making her go viral / Fuck it, I'm her idol."

She wrote the album's lead single, 'Eras of Us', after running into that same ex (whom she calls "one of my greatest loves") during a stop on Taylor Swift's Eras Tour at MetLife Stadium. It was tough to see someone with whom she had so much history, but she knew a song would almost certainly come from the experience. (Swift, by the way, is a fan, having told Fletcher how much she loved the lyrics of her 2019 hit 'Undrunk'.)

Fletcher, a champion of sexual fluidity who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community, winces at the idea of labelling her sexuality. "I love women, and women are beautiful, and they've been my muses," she says. "But I have found a lot more freedom in the expansion of releasing the idea that I have to be something all the time.

"If somebody had to put a label on me of queerness... but even that, it's just... I don't know. I just am. I just am..." She trails off. Her tone is mildly exasperated as she looks for the words to describe the energy she feels around those who inspire her songs. So, what makes a Fletcher muse? That, the singer is eager to talk about. "I have a lot more muses than people think I do. People think that songs are just about one specific person," she says, with a hint of pride.

Fletcher is still getting treatment for her Lyme disease and leaning on a support system that comprises family and friends – including Miley Cyrus, who Fletcher linked up with when the two performed sultry renditions of 'Becky's So Hot' and 'Midnight Sky' on Cyrus's New Year's Eve television special. "Her heart is so big, and she just gives so much presence and attention, and listens to you," Fletcher says of Cyrus. "I feel really lucky to have her energy and her presence in my life, and also the ways that she lifted me up."

"My life used to be signing boobs and tequila shots. I'm still signing tits. That's not changing"

After our conversation at the café, Fletcher pays up front, hugs me goodbye, and walks out the door. Once she's out of earshot, a couple of waiters look her up on Spotify and one plays 'Becky's So Hot'. In the viral hit, Fletcher sings, "*She's the one I should hate / But I wanna know how she tastes*." It's a messy girl anthem – the kind of mess Fletcher continues to heal from but hasn't completely shunned just yet.

These days are quieter for Fletcher. She wants to stick around as an artist, to play the long game – one that'd be impossible were she living the life she was in 2022. "My life used to be signing boobs and tequila shots," Fletcher had said as she finished her tea. Still, the chaos isn't gone. Sure, she drinks less and listens to her body more, but ...

"I'm still signing tits. That's not changing." ®

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TRAVEL

Rock City

Follow in the footsteps of rock royalty with a stay in iconic West Hollywood, LA

ONE OF THE first things you'll notice upon entering West Hollywood's legendary Sunset Marquis hotel is the huge image of Lou Reed that looms large over the pool. On the chilly February evening when I arrive, it means that the iconic cover shot of Reed's *Transformer* is silently looking down on any guests that have dared to take a dip in the brisk waters.

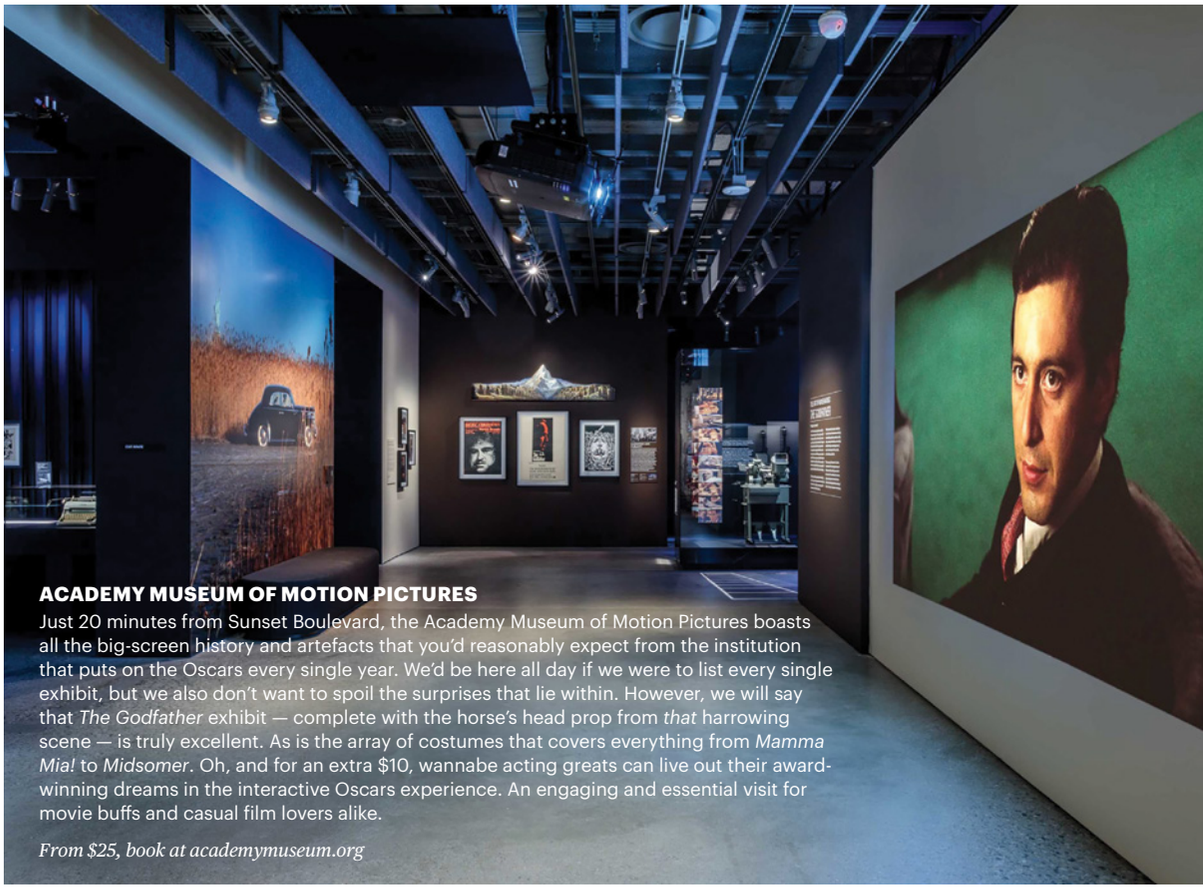
It's a fittingly imposing motif for the luxury hotel, which boasts a musical history unlike no other in West Hollywood. The likes of Joe Strummer, Debbie Harry and Slash have all stayed there, and their portraits adorn the walls.

Part of its legacy lies in its basement: this is the home of Nightbird Studios, where Rihanna recorded 'Stay' back in 2012. No wonder the studios boast more than 50 Grammy Award-winning albums to their name.

Located just off the Sunset Strip, it's the perfect place for music lovers to stay while taking in a district that might just be America's true home of hard rock.

The Whisky A Go-Go, located mere minutes from the hotel, became the epicentre of the genre in the 80s and provided a key place for the likes of Mötley Crüe and Guns N' Roses to cut their teeth. A stone's throw away from there, the legendary Troubadour is where a bespectacled lad from Pinner called Elton John played his first-ever US show.

So, come with us, as we take a look at the must-visits and must-dos for music lovers in West Hollywood.



ACADEMY MUSEUM OF MOTION PICTURES

Just 20 minutes from Sunset Boulevard, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures boasts all the big-screen history and artefacts that you'd reasonably expect from the institution that puts on the Oscars every single year. We'd be here all day if we were to list every single exhibit, but we also don't want to spoil the surprises that lie within. However, we will say that *The Godfather* exhibit — complete with the horse's head prop from *that* harrowing scene — is truly excellent. As is the array of costumes that covers everything from *Mamma Mia!* to *Midsomer*. Oh, and for an extra $10, wannabe acting greats can live out their award-winning dreams in the interactive Oscars experience. An engaging and essential visit for movie buffs and casual film lovers alike.

From $25, book at academymuseum.org

Jon D'Amico (right) with Rolling Stone's Nick Reilly

The lavish rooms at the Sunset Marquis hotel

◀ JON D'AMICO'S ROCK 'N WALK SUNSET STRIP TOUR

To put it simply: what former stage manager Jon D'Amico doesn't know about the Sunset Strip isn't worth knowing. And where he doesn't go, isn't worth going.

D'Amico — the former stage manager for the likes of Guns N' Roses and Stone Temple Pilots — is a brilliant guide to the rich and varied history of the area. We're loath to reveal too many details, but just know that you'll see the restaurant where Quentin Tarantino wrote large sections of *Pulp Fiction*, plus you might even stop for a drink at The Rainbow, where late Motörhead icon Lemmy propped up the bar most days.

Similarly, D'Amico will take you to a wide array of hidden gems that only locals would ever be able to tell you about, including the charming Mystery Pier Books, where deep-pocketed punters can pick up first editions of Dickens and Chandler, to name but two.

This whistle-stop tour is, in our opinion, the best way to take in the area's vast and rich history in one hugely entertaining and informative fell swoop.

From $59, book at rocknwalktours.com

GETTY IMAGES

Bob Marley performing at The Roxy Theatre in November 1979

ROXY50 EXHIBIT AT GRAMMY MUSEUM

As The Roxy hits 50, this excellent exhibition is the perfect tribute to Lou Adler's legendary venue. The Sunset Strip landmark is best known as the place that introduced America to the intoxicating world of the *Rocky Horror Show*, before hosting legendary gigs from the likes of Bob Marley, Adele and Guns N' Roses. On until June, this exhibition offers a comprehensive story of the venue's storied 50-year legacy, original memorabilia and 60 photographs of the shows that really defined the legend of The Roxy.

From $18, book at grammymuseum.org

▼ THE WHISKY A GO GO

Since opening in 1964, the Whisky a Go Go has developed into the kind of place in music lore that any venue owner would strive for. From The Byrds to Buffalo Springfield, from AC/DC to Mötley Crüe, the Whisky is the kind of club where you're wishing that the walls could speak and tell the secrets of all the iconic acts who have performed there.

These days, you can watch acts who are hoping to follow in the footsteps of those greats and carve their own place in Whisky history. We saw a bill of local and national rock talent including LA rockers Stonebreed and HXLA. With shows on nearly every night that start at under $20, it's the perfect way to contextualise and soak up the Whisky's legendary history.

From $20, book at ticketmaster.com

▼ CAVATINA RESTAURANT, SUNSET MARQUIS

If you're staying at the Sunset Marquis, then the Cavatina is a must-visit. Set in the hotel's idyllic outside area (but totally weatherproof too), this contemporary space is among the best spots to kick back and enjoy the West Hollywood highlife. Under the stewardship of chef Luis Morales, the Cavatina offers a mixture of high-end dishes and more casual offerings to suit every mood and appetite. Their Alta Loma Club Sandwich is a satisfying quick lunch bite, while dinner is defined by the luscious grilled blue prawns. If you're feeling really decadent, enjoy a meal and cocktails by one of the hotel's heated pools.

◀ MEL'S DRIVE-IN

Located just minutes from the Sunset Marquis, this is an essential spot for anyone wishing to soak up a piece of quintessential US diner culture. Simply rock up, choose your own booth and chow down on one of the many burgers, sandwiches, soups, salads and sliders that are on offer. The tableside jukeboxes are a cute touch too, allowing diners to part with a quarter in order to choose the tunes that will blare out across the restaurant.

There is real history here too: it was previously known as Ben Frank's, and the likes of Bob Dylan, Andy Warhol and Frank Zappa all stopped here for late-night eats.

The restaurant's youthful vibe also meant that TV executives put out a call for "spirited Ben Frank's types" when it came to casting *The Monkees* back in 1965.

▶ THE COMEDY STORE

If you're looking for a laugh, this legendary stand-up spot has got you sorted. This is where you can catch side-splitting sets from the comedy stars of tomorrow, as well as surprise unannounced sets from comedy giants. On the night we attended, *SNL* and *Ghostbusters* star Leslie Jones (pictured right) rocked up for an excellent hour-long set. Who knows who might just show up when you're there?

From $20, book at thecomedystore.com

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“I don’t feel like I need a future drawn out for me”

From *Kick-Ass* to *Kraven the Hunter* via his next big role opposite Ryan Gosling in *The Fall Guy*, Aaron Taylor-Johnson is Britain's next big film star

By Christina Newland

Photography by Kosmas Pavlos

Creative and styling by Joseph Kocharian

PREVIOUS SPREAD

AARON WEARS COAT BY **MAISON VALENTINO**, SHIRT BY **TOM FORD**, TROUSERS BY **LANVIN**, BOOTS BY **CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN**

THIS PAGE

AARON WEARS COAT BY **HOMME PLISSÉ ISSEY MIYAKE**, TANK TOP BY **TOM FORD AT MR PORTER**, TROUSERS BY **LANVIN**, EARRINGS AND RINGS (THROUGHOUT) AARON'S OWN

VERY MUCH BY accident, Aaron Taylor-Johnson – the swaggering 33-year-old star of action movies like *Bullet Train* and the bookies' favourite to be the next 007 – currently has access to my unlocked iPhone. I doubt he's thinking about it, but I certainly am: a movie star is sitting across from me at a restaurant, thumbing idly through my Notes app. I was showing him something relevant to our interview, but one backwards swipe could mean access to anything from my grocery lists to, well... God knows what. And here I was thinking it was the talent who was supposed to feel exposed at an interview.

Turns out it's a two-way street, as he hands my phone back to me. "What you gotta realise," he's saying to me, "is that what most people were doing in their twenties, I was doing when I was 13." We're discussing being judged about doing things at certain ages. You might be thinking of a certain tabloid furore over his meeting and falling in love with his wife of over 10 years, Sam Taylor-Johnson, when she directed him in her John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy*. With more than two decades between them, the public derision over their marriage was widespread and cruel. "You're doing something too quickly for someone else? I don't understand that. What speed are you supposed to enjoy life at? It's bizarre to me," he says.

We're perched in a quiet booth at a hip London private members' club. At first glance, with his prominent signet ring and black leather cowboy boots, Taylor-Johnson seems every ounce the slickly charismatic celebrity. He's exactly the kind you'd imagine as the face of an Armani fragrance and the lead of a forthcoming Marvel flick. But we're talking about marriage, separation, parenting and step-parenting with the solemn intensity of two lame lifestyle podcasters. ("Kids see what you're doing before they hear what you're saying. Actions speak louder than words," he's saying to me, while I nod sagely.) That kind of thing has a certain way of cutting through the pretence.

Taylor-Johnson has moved along at an accelerated pace for much of his life – and his career. He married and had children young; but he has also been acting since he was six. His first film was when he was 10 (*Shanghai Knights*, with Jackie Chan). And he left school altogether at the tender age of 15. He learned not through drama school, but by being on film sets ("You work with good and bad actors, divas and non-divas. You learn how not to behave," he says.) He also learned by auditioning endlessly, on after-school trips to London with his mum from his suburban hometown of High Wycombe.

"It might never last. I felt so lucky to be able to do these things. But it wasn't easy. Sometimes I'd audition twice a day five days a week, up and down London. I'd come out of school; my mum would take me to Amersham – the end of the Metropolitan line. We'd go into London, have a Maccy D, and go have an audition. And I didn't have pushy parents. They weren't showbiz parents. My dad was a civil engineer, and my mum did odd jobs. She got to chaperone me if I got a job. We were a unit."

He soon began to resent his teachers speaking to him like a child while the people in the film industry spoke to him like a professional. School grew less interesting. That's no surprise, seeing as he seems to be a whirlwind of constant energy in person; you can't really imagine him patiently sitting behind a desk. "Sometimes doing those jobs kept me out of trouble at the right time. In the suburbs of London, there's not much to do but piss around and be naughty. And that was fun, but acting was a saving grace," he says.

FAST-FORWARD TO 2024, and Taylor-Johnson has never stopped moving at speed. He keeps busy at his farm in Somerset with Sam, with whom he shares "four gorgeous daughters", as he dotingly refers to them. The eldest are Sam's from a previous marriage, aged 27 and 17, and then two tweens. And that's hardly the only thing.

Taylor-Johnson has recently wrapped shooting in Prague for Robert Eggers' latest – a reimagining of F.W Murnau's silent horror classic *Nosferatu*, and in May will begin shooting *Fuze*, a new heist thriller from *Hell or High Water* director David Mackenzie. Sandwiched in between have been more bombastic, mainstream projects: next up, he's playing the right side of hammy with a supporting role in David Leitch's lovable new action flick *The Fall Guy*, wherein Taylor-Johnson plays an egotistical A-lister with Ryan Gosling as his stuntman. The film is a riot of huge action sequences, very much Barbie's Ken amped to the nth degree. "David asked me about two weeks before production to do a cameo, and we expanded the role from there. It's a real love letter to the stunt crew," he muses.

Then, perhaps more pressingly, the actor is also the lead in the next major Marvel film from Sony. A dark origin story called *Kraven the Hunter*, it's based on a Spider-Man villain but belongs to its own spin-off storyline. Taylor-Johnson plays a megalomaniacal trophy hunter who kills big game for pleasure.

"I think there was something unique about this character, and something grounded. We've all had enough of seeing certain studio films, a certain kind of pop culture... where they're churning out stuff that dilutes wanting to go to the cinema. I wouldn't have signed onto it if I felt there wasn't something to really bring to life with this character."

The film's been slapped with an R rating in the States. An anecdote Taylor-Johnson tells me indicates that the source material is suitably gruesome. "I'm not a comic-

AARON WEARS COAT, SLEEVELESS JACKET, TOP, TROUSERS AND SHOES BY **BOTTEGA VENETA**

“It’s the best when you lose all inhibitions. It’s all about chasing that feeling. There’s nothing so exhilarating”

book reader, but there's one called *Kraven's Last Hunt*..." he says, and then proceeds to enthusiastically recount the morbid plot, wherein his character conquers Spidey and then commits suicide simply out of spite. "You just think, 'What the *fuck* have I just read?' That's the kind of character I'm playing. But then, a lot of the people who grew up with Marvel are old enough now to watch an R-rated movie," he points out.

"Taking on a Sony / Marvel movie is a different challenge altogether. There's the story, the character, the role; that's one thing. But then you also step into a world where you're dealing with a studio and a franchise – or possible franchises, though let's not get ahead of ourselves. So, they're rolling the dice on me, in a sense, which is a lovely thing," he says. "But you've got to appease the studio, please the audience and do what's dignified for you as an actor. I find all of that super challenging."

One key factor, he tells me, is to lead with kindness on a production so big: entitlement drives him nuts. Working as the leading man on a juggernaut of this size, people look to you to set the tone. Some actors come in and behave nicely to the cast and crew for a week before the facade crumbles and they act "like dickheads" again, as he puts it. It sours the atmosphere on set pretty fast.

But this one is directed by J.C. Chandor (late of *All Is Lost* and *A Most Violent Year*), so maybe there's some chance that it might be a bit more of a bone-crunching statement on violent masculinity than your average MCU fare.

SPEAKING OF VIOLENT masculinity, those Bond rumours are impossible not to ask about, but I'm greeted with a predictable poker face. "I can only really talk about the things I'm going to show and tell," he says. "So, *The Fall Guy*, *Nosferatu*, *Kraven the Hunter*. I'm here to promote those." When I say it must be flattering to be associated with 007, he stares at me in silence. I add that I know he couldn't possibly spill the beans to a journalist in this context; Barbara Broccoli is one formidable woman. More silence, although it is wry rather than severe. I laugh nervously. He asks me how my pasta is.

"I don't feel like I need to have a future drawn out for me. I feel like: whatever's drawn out for me, I can fuckin' do better," Taylor-Johnson tells me as we round out the evening with a cup of tea. We're discussing the idea of mapping out a career plan, but his attitude makes me feel like I've just been jolted into action by a motivational speaker. There's a real searching ambition in his voice. "It's the best when you sometimes lose all inhibitions completely, and you feel like you're dangling there, and the director has sort of got one finger on the back of your shirt, so you don't fall," he says. "It's all about chasing that feeling. There's nothing so exhilarating as that."

Or maybe nothing *nearly* as exhilarating, after all the literal handstands and impressive flips Taylor-Johnson delivers during his Rolling Stone UK cover shoot. It should be noted, none of the ensuing acrobatics were expected; the actor simply arrived on set, enthused, and began to display his dance training with such jaw-dropping gusto that the crew were left gasping at his unprompted agility. It's a perfect complement to his upcoming role in *The Fall Guy*, a film very much in praise of the unsung hero of the movie industry: the stunt double. (Although, it's clear Taylor-Johnson might prefer to throw his own punches. Or backflips.)

It seems to be almost perfectly in parallel to what marks his screen presence: a sense of vitality and physical grace. Whether he's pelting through a speeding train fighting Brad Pitt or tearing through African savannah with a knife in the trailer for *Kraven the Hunter*, Taylor-Johnson has proved himself to be an intensely physical performer, one for whom the transformation into a character is innately linked to the physicality of the role. "I grew up dancing; I work with movement coaches," he says.

> "Taking on a Sony/Marvel movie is a different challenge altogether ... You've got to appease the studio, please the audience and do what's dignified for you as an actor"

Athleticism is pivotal to the way Taylor-Johnson seems to work. Bulked up though he was for *Kraven the Hunter*, it's the speed and dexterity of the dancer that seems to suit him best. He studied gymnastics and dance from a young age and was one of the very few boys in a dance school full of girls. He is a dedicated lover of tap. ("Where's our musical?" I ask him. "Please someone write me a musical. I'd do it!" he replies without pause, before briefly praising *Singin' in the Rain* star Donald O'Connor.) Even when we're not talking about

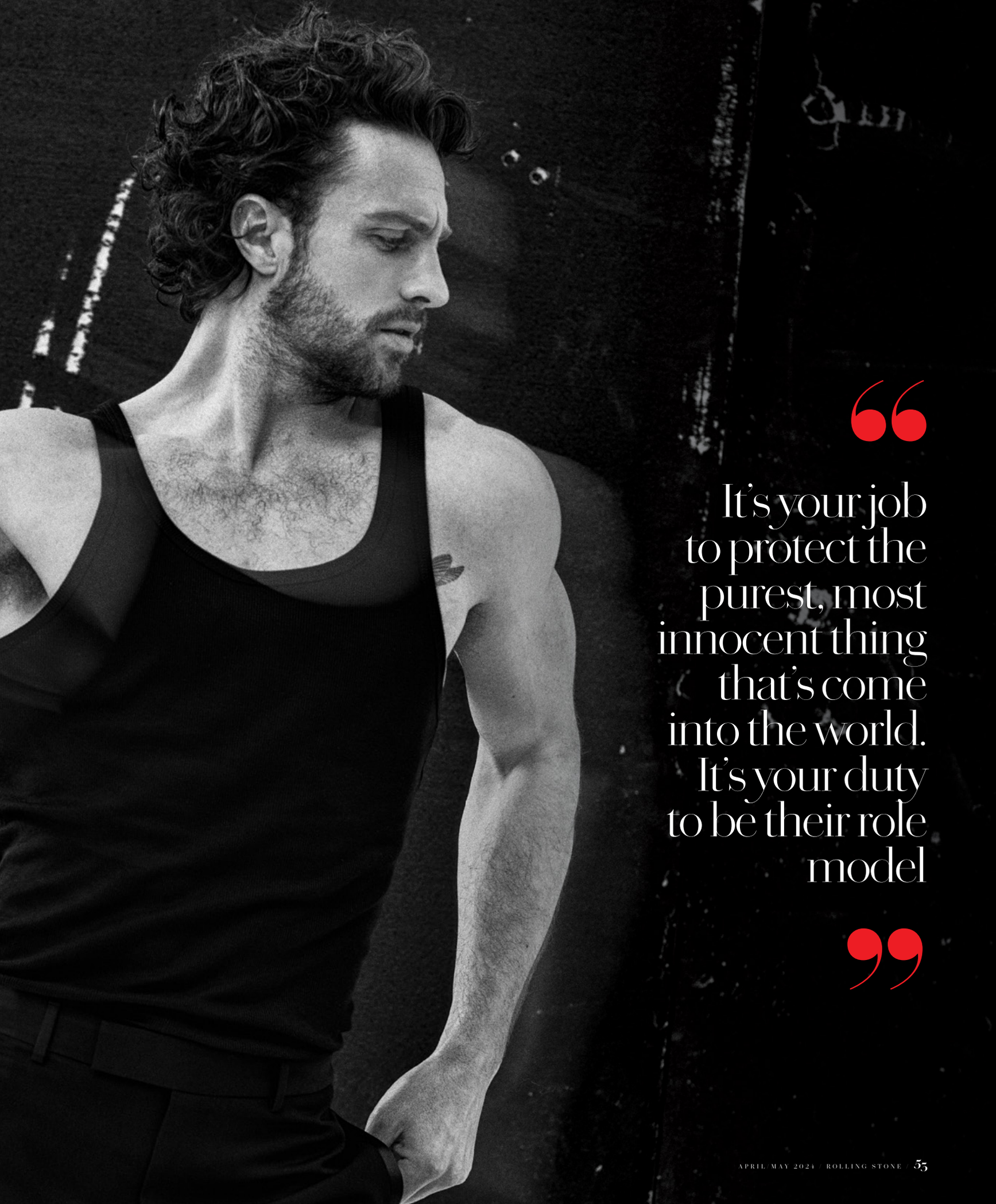
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

(AND BELOW RIGHT) AARON WEARS **LEATHER JACKET, VINTAGE HELMUT LANG FROM NORDIC POETRY,** TOP BY **NANUSHKA,** MOTORCYCLE TROUSERS BY **BELSTAFF,** NECKLACE BY **PAWNSHOP,** BRACELET BY **GOOSSENS PARIS**

AARON WEARS SHIRT BY **TOM FORD,** TROUSERS BY **LANVIN**

AARON WEARS TANK TOP BY **CALVIN KLEIN,** TROUSERS BY **BOSS**

AARON WEARS TANK TOP BY **TOM FORD AT MR PORTER**, TROUSERS BY **LANVIN**, HOLDING BLAZER BY **CELINE HOMME BY HEDI SLIMANE**



> It's your job to protect the purest, most innocent thing that's come into the world. It's your duty to be their role model

dance, as such, Taylor-Johnson organically connects actors he likes by the way they move. This feels telling about his own approach. "Alain Delon, I've been watching a lot of his films," Taylor-Johnson tells me. "I like the way he moved. His elegance, and his stillness."

That sense of transformative athleticism was never more present than in his preparations for *Kraven the Hunter*. Training to become a supervillain is serious business, particularly when the comic-book depictions of the character – as Taylor-Johnson points out – are so outlandishly jacked. In other words, he needed to both bulk up and be agile enough to move like a stealthy predator. "I wanted to approach it like an actor, and I'm not someone who's just juicing up and going to the gym. I don't necessarily want this to be my brand, doing one action movie after another. But I trained to the point where I was 200 pounds of muscle. I ate so much fucking food. I was so big," he says.

I ask if he sees any kind of undue pressure on actors to achieve a certain bulked-up (read: unrealistic) body type, in the way that women might have historically been expected to trim down to extremes. "I don't feel that pressure, no," he says. "I like shapeshifting, but also, I wanted to try and do other roles. When I went to work with Robert Eggers, it was set in the Victorian era. I couldn't look that wide. So, I had to really slim down. And he wanted us to look quite gaunt in the face." Compared to the likes of Matthew Vaughn, Robert Eggers was a significant change of pace. "Robert Eggers is such a cinephile, and such an encyclopaedia of film. I didn't care how big the role [in *Nosferatu*] was, or whatever – I just wanted to be a part of his vision, and the boundaries he's pushing in cinema. And when you work with people who are on that level of genius in their craft, there's an energy with that that you ride on," he enthuses.

> "We became really tight and reliant on each other, in a healthy, creative way. That's all because of Robert Eggers"

Often, Eggers shot the film with only one set-up per day, and with a dolly moving 360 degrees around a room during a scene – a bit more like filmed theatre than contemporary cinema. It meant that Taylor-Johnson and the rest of the cast had to aim for perfection. "It's an ensemble piece – Willem Dafoe, Nick Hoult, Emma Corrin – and we became super tight,' Taylor-Johnson says. "If you mess up your line or your beat, you went back to the beginning again. So, you felt very responsible for not messing up someone else. You could be 10 minutes into a scene and thinking, 'Oh my God, Willem is absolutely crushing it, if I mess my bit up, that's so unfair for them.' So, we became really tight and reliant on each other, in a healthy, creative way. And you don't experience that often in movies. And that's all because of Robert Eggers, and how meticulous his approach is."

Taylor-Johnson expresses admiration for actors like Christian Bale and Michael Fassbender, too, both of whom have used their body weight and physical transformation to hone their craft. He sometimes wishes he'd gone to RADA or similar; he's appreciative of the dedication of performers that studied the Method, for instance. "I could always watch any Al Pacino 70s movie – *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon* – these beautiful, well-constructed movies. How many films are like that now? Or something about real people, like *Blue Valentine*, that'll rip your fucking heart out. But something with texture and vibe and earthiness, it's tough to find," he says.

We talk filmmakers for a while and he shares his enthusiastic appreciation for Christopher

OPPOSITE

AARON WEARS TOP, **VINTAGE CHRISTIAN DIOR FROM NORDIC POETRY**, TROUSERS BY **HERMÈS**

THIS PAGE

AARON WEARS **COAT, SHIRT AND TROUSERS BY LOUIS VUITTON**, BOOTS BY **ANGRY ITCH FROM ROKIT**

Nolan, who he worked with in a supporting part in *Tenet*. While pondering directors I could see him well matched with, I think of French arthouse legend Claire Denis. There's something about the actor's combination of romance and grit – combined with his tabloid-publicised personal life – that makes me think of her characters. Turns out that Denis felt the same way; the two had a meeting for an undisclosed project back in 2020. "She had something she was going to do, but I don't know if she's moved on from it now. We had a great meeting though. She's very cool," Taylor-Johnson offers.

If there's one filmmaker you simply can't keep Taylor-Johnson from getting excited about, it is, understandably, his wife. 'Sam is actually a great filmmaker and a wonderful storyteller. People will think there's sort of a bias to me saying it, but I think when they see *Back to Black* [her upcoming Amy Winehouse biopic], everyone's going to realise how fantastic a filmmaker she is," he says emphatically. Of course, he himself has experience being directed by Sam. But he points out that it's difficult to balance their collaborations with the sense that any perceived or actual criticism of them – as with their film together from 2019, *A Million Little Pieces* – hurts more keenly. 'There's a protectiveness that I feel; I think it's really difficult. There's also part of me that feels like if something didn't work, I'm the one that's responsible," he says.

Similarly, he's cautious about bringing any of his toxic male characters back into the family home. "I tend to soak up and absorb the atmosphere. And it's important for me to get rid of that and shed that skin when I come home to cuddle my kids at night. When I did *Nocturnal Animals*, I lived out in fucking Mojave Desert and was in a motel for the entire time to do that job. There was no way on earth I was bringing that back into my house."

We return to lifestyle podcaster mode. "People see and perceive this thing around my career, and that's OK," he says. "But I'm just trying to juggle my family and my work. I'm doing normal life; dentist appointments," he tells me. "Career doesn't necessarily take a back seat, but it takes a different thought behind the choices that you make. But you also discover characters you're drawn to because of that, you're not just some 20-year-old anymore. You unlock some secret thing," he explains. Equally, the reason he hasn't taken on a television limited series – in spite of good opportunities to do so, he hints – has been the extended amount of time that they would take him away from the family. "I don't want a jobbing career," he says. He's conscious that he has better things to do, it seems.

On reflection, his generous manner now falls into place. On the first day I meet Taylor-Johnson, we wend our way through Portobello Market, chatting about the perils of social media and his family's menagerie of farm animals in Somerset ("It's like Noah's Ark," he says of their selection of pigs, chickens, dogs, and cows), before landing at a small establishment serving up fresh Italian stew with bread and Parmesan. Taylor-Johnson is greeted in familiar terms by the proprietor and gets us two warm bowls of old-fashioned comfort food for lunch, refusing to let me pay. The more you get to know Aaron Taylor-Johnson, the more it makes sense that this is a man with four daughters and a farm full of animals to look after.

All of this to say, there is a surprisingly gentle energy that emanates from the actor. It's there in his alarm about me possibly getting lost, or waiting too long for him, or being cold. It's in his complete sincerity as he talks about his daughters being born, saying, "You realise it's your job to protect the purest, most innocent thing that's come into the world. And it's your duty to be their role model. You are going to be reflected in their choices later on in life, from who their partners are to how they carry themselves in the world."

> "People see and perceive this thing around my career, and that's OK, but I'm just trying to juggle my family and my work. I'm doing normal life ... Career doesn't necessarily take a back seat"

Taylor-Johnson has had a certain knack for playing foul-mouthed assassins and charming douchebags of all kinds, from *Fall Guy*'s outrageous movie star egotism all the way back to the petulant quipping of *Kick-Ass*. He brings bouncy, roguish energy and a helping of Byronic sexiness to any anti-hero he turns his hand to. And yet back here on earth, there's much less of all that big Hollywood talk, and much more chat about taking his girls on university visits.

While we eagerly anticipate Taylor-Johnson's year ahead, it's easy to wonder what's next for Hollywood's most grounded new leading man. So, come on. Someone write the man a musical, or he'll have to go and be James Bond. ®

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE

AARON WEARS **LEATHER JACKET, VINTAGE HELMUT LANG FROM NORDIC POETRY**, TOP BY **NANUSHKA**, NECKLACE BY **PAWNSHOP**, BRACELET BY **GOOSSENS PARIS**, ROYAL OAK OFFSHORE SELFWINDING CHRONOGRAPH, 42MM BY **AUDEMARS PIGUET**

AARON WEARS JACKET **BY EMPORIO ARMANI**, TANK TOP BY **CALVIN KLEIN**, TROUSERS BY **BOSS**, SHOES BY **CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN**

AARON WEARS COAT BY **HOMME PLISSÉ ISSEY MIYAKE**, TANK TOP BY **TOM FORD AT MR PORTER**, TROUSERS BY **LANVIN**

AARON WEARS LEATHER BLAZER BY **TOM FORD**, SHIRT BY **TOM FORD**, TROUSERS BY **LANVIN**

GROOMING BY LUCY HALPERIN USING ARMANI BEAUTY; POST-PRODUCTION: DIENACHBARIN; FASHION ASSISTANT: AARON PANDHER; FIRST PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: LUKE JOHNSON; SECOND PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: IVYC

Rolling Stone UK selects the best of music's new voices — 25 artists who are set to make 2024 their year

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future »» 25

rachel chinouriri

"I WANT TO have a legacy that is set in stone in the future, and I know what I want to represent," Rachel Chinouriri tells Rolling Stone UK over coffee in an east London café on an uncharacteristically balmy morning in early February. "What I want is to inspire the other 13-year-old Black girls who are confused about their identity but love rock music. I want them to be like, 'Oh God, it's possible. It actually exists.' In 10 years' time, I'm hoping to look back knowing that my album has been really influential in helping move stepping stones for Black artists."

It's the bold manifesto of an artist who already knows what they want to be, and with extremely good reason. When Chinouriri was a teenager, the Londoner had two musical idols: VV Brown and Noisettes singer Shingai Shoniwa, both Black British women who were blazing their own trails within UK indie music.

But when Chinouriri set out on her own path, she was continuously mislabelled as an R&B and soul artist – even though a single listen of her breakout track 'So My Darling' is evidence that this couldn't be further from the truth.

By 2022, Chinouriri had had enough. "My music is not R&B. My music is not

Rachel Chinouriri reflects on her struggle to overcome stereotypes and establish herself as a Black indie artist, as well as the heartbreak that informs her forthcoming debut album

BY NICK REILLY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK ALEXANDER

> "I've been doing music properly since I was 18, so the fact I'm having my debut album all these years later is mad"

soul. My music is not alternative R&B. My music is not neo soul. My music is not jazz. Black artists doing indie is not confusing. You see my colour before you hear my music," she powerfully wrote on Instagram.

She adds to Rolling Stone UK, "I remember people putting Black squares on their Instagram when George Floyd's death happened, and they said they wanted to listen, so I thought, 'It's time for me to speak up about it.' Now, it's really worked out for me."

Her debut album, the upcoming *What a Devastating Turn of Events*, is a triumph that's defined by alt-rock guitars, softer confessional moments, and the overriding sense that Chinouriri could be a voice to define indie music for the next decade.

And then there's the small matter of friends in high places. At a recent Las Vegas residency show, Adele told her fans: "There's a new artist, she's British, her name is Rachel [Chinouriri] and she does, like, indie music. She's absolutely amazing." Then Adele added that she is planning to attend Chinouriri's Los Angeles show this spring. "I'm going to go on my own," she said. "That's what I'm gonna do."

Chinouriri has also forged a firm friendship with A-lister Florence Pugh, who recently starred in the music video for 'Never Need Me'.

It's for these reasons we're convinced she might just be the future of music, even if Chinouriri's arrival has been, in her own words, a "long time coming". "I've been doing music properly since I was 18, so the fact that I'm having my debut album all these years later is kind of mad, but I've been on such a massive personal and career journey," she says.

"I've been trying to navigate the industry, and I feel like I've hit a point of knowing how to navigate it in the healthiest way possible because it can get really quite bad. But I've managed to navigate what I want for my career beyond a TikTok trend too."

Even if TikTok may have helped Chinouriri's sound find an early audience through viral hits like the heartbreaking 'So My Darling', she admits that the overriding sound of the album is shaped by an era that long predates that site arriving on the scene. "There's a real noughties flavour to the album, and it's been interesting because that allows it to become nostalgic," she says.

"It's about the idea of missing home, and that for me comes from the nostalgia of turning on the radio and hearing artists like Arctic Monkeys for the first time. It's not necessarily indie, but I remember hearing MIA's 'Paper Planes' too, and it's the first time I can recall my brain absorbing music. That's a thing I miss in a way."

Home, for Chinouriri, is Croydon, south London, where the singer was raised by Zimbabwean parents. Her strict religious upbringing, she admits, resulted in a situation where it wasn't always that easy to listen to the music that has now shaped her career.

"My parents wouldn't let me play non-Christian music, and when they'd leave, my siblings would put on Channel U and MTV and play Eminem, Destiny's Child. I loved that stuff, but I've got three older sisters and one older brother, so they'd just say, 'Shut up, Rachel!' And I'd go and do my own thing."

But one artist that her parents *did* approve of, however, was Shingai Shoniwa of the Noisettes. "They'd look at her and go: 'Yes! A Zimbabwean girl doing well, we can let this one slide!'"

She also points to the "unapologetic" and "tough" spirit of Skunk Anansie singer Skin in helping her to navigate the choppy waters of the music industry. "Seeing how unapologetic she was in herself, knowing her art and not wanting to take shit from anyone, that was just fantastic."

Throughout our chat, you can't help but sense that Chinouriri has developed the thick skin and pure artistry of those musicians. This has been largely honed, no doubt, from dealing with the aforementioned problems with record labels and casual listeners refusing to accept the artist that Chinouriri actually is.

"From the start, my manager, who is a white man, told me that it would be a struggle to get the message across, and I didn't think it would be that big of a deal. But within two years, I did feel like I was trying to swim against the stream, and it did get me down."

She adds, "I'm friends with so many white female artists in the industry, and they already have a tough time. We'll talk about the same struggles, but I would talk about my added ones, and it became a hard thing to swallow, to realise mine were simply because of my race."

Still, change is coming, she assures me, and playlist curators at Spotify and Apple have been among those ringing the necessary changes to get Chinouriri where she needs to be. "We're changing the narrative, but in turn it's cost me a lot of time and a potentially more successful career because we're having to fix a bunch of stuff, and I'm glad it's changing, but it is difficult."

It has also given her fuel, she explains, to turn up the guitars on her debut album. "I've had to consciously make that decision, and of course I love soul, R&B and all the music I grew up with. But even by putting one soulful song in there, the entire campaign could potentially go wrong because everyone focuses on that one thing 'cos it's easier to market a Black woman in soul or R&B than it ever is with indie."

There is remarkable candour on the record too. The title track, for instance, is inspired by the story of a cousin who took her own life. Chinouriri says she too has come close to a suicide attempt.

"She took her own life after going through a really tough situation where she basically loved really hard and faced an awful end to a relationship. I hadn't met her, but I'd heard so much about her, and I learned it was almost a complete copy and paste of what I'd gone through with one of my previous partners," she reflects, before pausing.

"Thank God, I didn't take that route. But I'd written suicide letters, I'd gone to the shop to try and buy a rope, and I don't know what it was that day, but my best friend texted me after not speaking to her for about two weeks. She just said, 'I'm thinking about you,' and I just broke down in B&Q. I got an Uber to her house and just broke down."

Now, Chinouriri says she's in a much better place altogether. "I've been given loads of advice, and the team that helped me was incredible. But that song was the first time I'd ever revealed to my family that I had done that."

She adds, "It's not directly my story, that song, but it's a story which I know I have gone through, and many women have walked it too."

It's these life experiences that have informed the shape of the record, Chinouriri explains. It makes a buoyant start through songs such as 'The Hills' – drenched in euphoric alt-rock guitars rooted in the late 90s – before a sombre flip takes hold around the midway point. It means that the title track hits with an added punch when it arrives eight songs into the album.

"It's a weird thing," she explains. "Life can be just going along and then something flips and everything changes, whether that's life, death, trauma, or even finding out you're pregnant. Your life can completely flip unexpectedly. I wanted to flip it and show that somehow we're all cruising along with these things."

It's no wonder that the universally relatable message of heartbreak and hardship is already finding a captive audience at sell-out shows too. As this interview goes to press, Chinouriri will play a sell-out show at London's Koko before US dates – including that potential meeting with Adele – beckon.

"My team told me: 'You've done four sold-out, 250-capacity venues. You can't keep doing small venues,' and I said, 'Yes! Yes, I can!' But they suggested Koko, and when it did sell out, I was actually incredibly shocked. I'm excited to show what I can do as a performer though."

But if the sadness has got her this far, don't expect more of the same on album two. Chinouriri is in a place that doesn't necessarily lend itself to the same circumstances.

"When I was younger, I was so, like, traumatised and surrounded by chaos," she explains. "So, I always had a complete story to write about. But now I'm in a really healthy place. I'm in a really loving relationship, and I've been surrounded by so much love. When my team first met me, I was quite broken, but I hid it quite well. And it was only when they started working with me, they probably noticed. Now, I can't write a song unless something terrible happens. But I'm surrounded by so much love, I can actually probably write about positive things, which feels like a new challenge to me."

She adds, "Speaking about the love that surrounds me is seeming like an exciting and a much healthier place to be."

"it's a weird thing. life can be just going along, and then something flips and everything changes"

central cee

CENTRAL CEE IS the Future of Music, but if you look at the UK rap scene in 2024, he is unmistakably the present, too. Since he emerged in 2019, the rapper has sold out arenas, topped charts and been emblazoned on billboards and London buses. His 2022 single 'Doja' was as omnipresent as songs get, and through EPs, mixtapes and freestyles, he's proved himself a dextrous rapper and an in-your-face personality. A child of the UK's drill scene of the 2010s, he's leading the next generation of stars that are keeping rap as the dominant UK genre of the day, helped by the fact that the elder statesmen who influenced him have rushed to give him co-signs.

His only solo release of 2023 — the single 'Entrapreneur' — landed at the tail end of last year, but he still managed to come out on top after also landing the longest-reigning UK rap single in chart history with Dave collaboration 'Sprinter', taken from the pair's *Split Decision* project. A debut album is still awaited from the rapper though, which could take him even closer to global superstar status and solidify his promise as a one-of-a-kind artist.

JACK BRIDGLAND

master peace

"I CAN MAKE as many indie songs as I want, I can fucking fly this flag, and people still call me a rapper," Master Peace told Rolling Stone UK last year, laying out the continued difficulties for Black artists to break out of antiquated boxes that they simply don't fit into.

After years of pandering to others and accepting being told that he couldn't change, Peace Okezie's transformative debut album *How to Make a Master Peace* finally sees him embracing his fierce love of indie music and redefining it for 2024. Packed with hooks and sleazy instrumentals, the record could — and should — become formative for a new generation of indie fans and is the delightful sound of an artist finally being allowed to represent their true self. Alongside fellow Future of Music

inductee Rachel Chinouriri, Master Peace is blazing a trail for the future of indie music, finally giving underrepresented voices their time in the spotlight. "I know how hard I've had to fight for people just to take me in and take away the colour from it, and just listen to the music," he told us. "If I can bring that for [Black people] and give people inspiration to want to do it for themselves, I feel like my job is complete."

"I'M JUST HOPING that this album cements us as one of the rock bands of this time," NewDad singer Julie Dawson told Rolling Stone UK about the group's debut album *Madra* late last year.

Take one listen to *Madra*, and you'll realise that Dawson's hopes are well founded. Here is an album that establishes them as the leading lights of a Gen-Z shoegaze revival and one that can easily stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the genre's forebears. "I just want more people to know who we are and be on the radio everywhere because that would be very, very cool," said Dawson. "But mostly, we just want to set that standard and prove what we can do. Because we did disappear for a bit while we tried to figure out where we wanted to take the album. But honestly, we are all so proud of it and we want to show everyone we're not messing around."

caity baser

CAITY BASER BEGAN her year with nominations for both the BRITs Rising Star and BBC Radio 1 Sound Of 2024 awards and has returned with new mixtape *Still Learning*. "I don't dress things up — it annoys me!" Baser told Rolling Stone UK. "Say it straight to my face. And what!" Here, Baser distils her alluring and potentially arena-filling appeal — her music is about trusting in your convictions, and it also happens to be sugary and radio-friendly. "My whole life people have been sugarcoating shit. I'm just like: 'Be honest! Even if it hurts my feelings.'"

Like many 2020s success stories, her journey began on TikTok, but the cheeky personality and melodic strength of her songs ensures that they translate beyond the app, too. You can draw a direct line from 2000s staples Lily Allen and Kate Nash to Baser thanks to her conversational, sarcastic tone, but, vitally, her songs transcend kitschy elements and pack a serious pop punch as well. After flirting with rock and drum'n'bass in past musical lives, she's now settled on pop, and it suits her well — here's a pop star with bundles of enthusiasm and hit songs with withering kiss-offs to her detractors.

lava la rue

LAVA LA RUE is a true musical polymath. The singer started their journey as a founder of south London's acclaimed NiNE8 collective — which included the likes of Mac Wetha and Biig Piig — but they've now broken out to become a true genre-spanning star in their own right. Their sounds veer from contemporary rap to more classic, 70s-flecked tunes, and represent the melting pot of cultures that surrounded them when growing up in south London.

"We all lived on the same block together, and we went home and would eat each other's food, and speak each other's slang," they previously told Rolling Stone UK. "I was raised by the Caribbean side of my family, and music is so inherent to that culture. My grandma took me to Black church, and my parents, who are quite young, were ravers. My mum listened to a lot of pirate radio: jungle, drum'n'bass, 90s happy hardcore and that kind of stuff."

But give their material — including 2022's excellent *Hi-Fidelity* EP — a listen, and you'll find that none of it feels out of place. With genre becoming an increasingly obsolete word, Lava La Rue is redefining what it means to be a true artist.

LAVA LA RUE BLACKSOCKS: SAM TOMPKINS: MITCH PERYER

sam tompkins

SAM TOMPKINS HAD a massive 2023, selling out Hammersmith Apollo and even being tipped for Rolling Stone UK's Rising Star Award. Now, it looks like the musical polymath is set to continue that hot streak with his debut album *Hi, My Name Is Insecure*, a powerfully raw dissection of mental health. "As I've got older and meet more people, most people I know have at some point lost someone they loved prematurely through illness, suicide or other things; myself included," he explains.

"It's coming from a place where you want to enjoy your life and move forward, but in a lot of cases because you didn't get closure, you feel as though you can't. You honestly think maybe just one call from that person would give you peace, but sadly life doesn't always work like

that," he told Rolling Stone UK. "When I lost my dad to suicide in November of last year, this song felt even more powerful to me, so it felt like the most fitting way to come into 2024. To show others that they are not alone in their struggles and that we can all get through these things if we just open up conversation."

Big Special

"PROP ME UP *in a greasy spoon / Under an English summer pale moon / Another desperate breakfast / Out of the rains of June*," comes the distinctive growl of Big Special singer Joe Hicklin on 'Desperate Breakfast', one of the early stand-out tracks from the Black Country duo.

As those scathing lyrics suggest, Hicklin and drummer Callum Moloney are only too aware that, as Blur once attested, modern life is rubbish. But where others will trudge along in the monotonous minutiae of daily life, this pair are experts at dissecting our tumultuous times in a way that's rarely been done before, and finding unity in the bleakest of circumstances.

"I think that's the overall sentiment of our debut album (the upcoming *POSTINDUSTRIAL BLUES*)," says Hicklin. "We don't want to give any answers or say that we know the way. It's just us going, 'This is shit, we know it's shit, and you know it's shit, but let's try and do something together.'"

There have been plenty of bands raising similar state-of-the-nation moments in recent years (see the brutal electronics of Teesside noisemakers Benefits), but it's the sonic palette of Big Special that makes them a truly exciting proposition.

That aforementioned track skips along with a haunting, Tom Waits-esque groove, while 'This Here Ain't Water' sees Hicklin transforming into the kind of God-fearing fire-and-brimstone preacher that you'd expect to see in the deep south of America. Elsewhere, the pounding 'Trees' bounces along with an electronic groove that buries itself within your skull after one listen.

Moloney and Hicklin first became friends when they were 17 but went on their own creative paths before being drawn back together under the lure of Big Special during lockdown, a decade after their first meeting.

"It sounds cheesy, but the two big green arrows that stand out in my life are when I met my partner Billie, who I'm now engaged to, and when Joe sent me that first Big Special demo," explains Hicklin. "I just thought, 'I *need* to be part of this.'" Now, it looks like that faith is duly paying off. Let us present the band that we think will become a defining act in the future of UK music.

Big Special's Joe Hicklin and Callum Moloney are finally ready to unleash their state-of-the-nation debut album

BY NICK REILLY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK ALEXANDER

I was already excited to chat to you two, but it seems more of an occasion that we're chatting on the morning that your debut album is announced.

HICKLIN: Yeah, it's been fucking crazy, man. Our phones are exploding, and I've just had to move my phone away from it, so I don't have to hear any of that while we're chatting. There's part of us that feels like you're giving up your child to the world to be picked apart, but it's been the main thing for us for three years now and we've put a lot of time into this. We're at our producer's house now, just before we send the record off, and it's very important to us. After five o clock today, it's done and then that's that. That's a bit fucking terrifying, but it's been a long time coming, man.

One thing that really stood out to me is the variety in your songs. It's easy to pin

Joe Hicklin (left) and Callum Moloney

you both as this state-of-the-nation duo, but there's some amazing depth and soul in there.

HICKLIN: We like to think so. We pretty much had the idea for this album before the band. It was like we came together to make this album, which really feels like a bit of a journey through a lot of levels. On one hand, it's a record that tackles the cycles of depression I've gone through, but we want it to flow, and we're quite open to genres. We've got huge influences from across the board. So, if we wanted to do something a bit more soul, we could go in that direction. If we wanted to do something a bit more hip hop or a bit more punk, we could go in that direction as long as we can do whatever we want. There needs to be a central voice of what we're doing and that gives us creative freedom.

Another thing that struck me is the story behind you two coming together. You were friends, but Callum's faith in the project made him abandon some comfy financial gigs in order to do this band.

MOLONEY: We were in bands as kids, and we came together after a decade of not writing music together. I was a drummer, and I always say it's impossible to make money as a drummer. If you ever have kids, and they want to pick up an instrument, don't give them a pair of fucking drums because they'll be broke until they're in their thirties!

But I'd been playing in a bunch of function bands, and for once I was getting decent money from it. I was working on the vans too, and the money was good there. So, when Joe messaged me saying, "I want to start a band," it was tough. That's a big, open-ended statement, especially when you're nearing 30 like we were. I didn't want to be that dad in fucking denim down the pub when I'm 40, so initially I said no. I'd been with my partner for seven years at that point too, and she'd stuck me out when I wasn't making decent money.

HICKLIN: I completely understood his reasons too, but I *did* say to my wife that I was going to ask Cal one more time. I sent him our demo for 'This Here Ain't Water' and, well...

MOLONEY: It sounds cheesy, but the two big green arrows that stand out in my life are when I met my partner Billie, who I'm now engaged to, and when Joe sent me that demo. I just thought, 'I *need* to be part of this.' I left a bunch of the wedding bands and started doing more work on the vans to make up for it. Three years on, and it's been the best decision I ever made because it's been mad.

HICKLIN: It's funny what comes out of stressful periods because I wasn't even working at the time I wanted to make this band. I was in a fucking mad depression, and it's just mad that it's all come back around. We just filmed our latest video in the place where we used to rehearse, like, 13 years ago when we were kids.

MOLONEY: I wish we could, like, lean over the shoulder of them 18-year-old lads and be like, "Oi! In 12 fucking years' time, you're still gonna be broke. But you're gonna be buzzing!"

HICKLIN: I'd reply, "12 fucking years?! That long!"

You've really landed on something with your lyrics though. 'Desperate Breakfast' feels like this incredible reflection of the rut and malaise that so much of the UK seems to be in right now.

HICKLIN: This is the thing I wanna tackle and write about with my music. It's just honest, man. It's just about personal experience, and if I can be honest about what's happening day to day to me, then that might be happening to however many other people, you know.

MOLONEY: It's us being honest and open about the social depression of England at the moment. The lack of any sort of cultural identity and the ignorance towards the working class. The mental health needs of the nation – we're just trying to look at that darkness through our own eyes.

What have your own experiences of that been like?

HICKLIN: I wasn't working when I formed this band, and it was pretty bad. It was lockdown, when we were forced to be retrospective, and I was going over years of work and family and how all the things in that realm tend to work. Work, trying to be professional while dealing with mental health issues, and how that relates to anyone. But there's a real thread of hope through the album too. Me and Cal talk a lot about how much our wives support us, and with my wife, she's been a massive part of that. A big part of the album to me is how she just wouldn't see me drown.

But the album ends on the song 'Dig', and it's about that feeling of something being shit, but you just gotta keep fucking moving

> **"it does feel like we've just announced that we're pregnant. now we're finally ready to let our child out" — *callum***

forward and see what happens. I think that's the overall sentiment. We don't want to give any answers or say that we know the way. It's just us going, "This is shit, we know it's shit, and you know it's shit, but let's try and do something together."

MOLONEY: Joe says it live quite a lot, there's a lot of power in shouting at the void together. It's a big release for people to be able to come and just shout at the void!

What are the politics of Big Special? Your music touches on quite a lot of social issues, but it never feels too implicit or preachy.

HICKLIN: We love music that does that. We love Benefits and that on-the-nose political thing they do so well, but we want to be creative in our way too. I don't want to hide anything, though. Like, I can tell you now that we're both fully leftist, it's just that we don't want to nail ourselves to a post too much in our music. We're not trying to explain anything to anyone. We like the idea of people taking their own view from our music; we try and be personal so that people can relate to the wider human experience of what we're on about.

MOLONEY: We don't wait to nail it to a post either. To be like, 'Oh, we're just a political band. We're just a working-class band. We're just a mental health band.' Because the more you start doing that, the narrower are the opportunities. It's clear that we're talking about the Tories, but there's a million other things you can take from our music.

Another thing that struck me is the sheer breadth of your sound too. On one hand you've got electronic beats like 'Trees', but then 'This Here Ain't Water' sounds like a god-fearing preacher launching one hell of a sermon!

HICKLIN: One of the main things is I knew I didn't want to play the guitar on stage, and then the rest of it was experimenting with that and defining what our sound would become.

MOLONEY: And that's funny because Joe is from a guitar background; no one knows how good this guy is on guitar. He's got this secret weapon too, our kid. He can scream the most important lyrics you've ever heard back at you, and then the next minute he'll sound like fucking Frank Sinatra!

You've already got quite a bit of support in your corner too – Steve Lamacq and Tom Robinson have been constant champions of your band on 6Music.

MOLONEY: Ah, good old Lammo! I was actually in London with my fiancée in Brixton for a gig, and we were walking back to our airbnb afterwards when we just bumped into him! He plays the music of thousands of bands, but he just stopped and was chatting to me for 20 minutes about how much he loves this band. He championed us before we got signed in December 2022. He found it, heard it, and whacked it on. Tom Robinson asked us to support him at a little gig in Brum too.

It's underrated how much of a big deal it is to smaller bands, you know, like when you're trying to make that leap into being a band that people recognise and take seriously. We'd be doing one gig a month because that's all we had the time for, and then suddenly it'd be like, "Wow, Steve Lamacq played our music!" That's enough momentum for people to pay attention to what we do. That confidence boost can keep you going for another month because there can be a lot of rejection in the industry, people turning away and not listening.

So, he's been really nice, and so too have all the fans who jumped on and supported us. We haven't had any real negativity; people have been supportive and it feels like they're getting our music and what it's about too.

That's why it feels so nice to announce the album this morning. People have been sending a load of support to us and it's lovely. It does feel like we've just announced that we're pregnant. Now we're finally ready to let our child out!

anish kumar

IF YOU WANT to get an idea of what the future of British dance music looks like, you'd do worse than to pay attention to Dialled In. The organisation, which focuses on music made by British South Asians, says of itself: "Our purpose is to spotlight and platform the wealth of South Asian artistry by building long-term, self-sustainable spaces to ensure our culture is held while it evolves and expands."

Leading this pack of exciting new names in dance music is Anish Kumar, a Cambridge veterinary medicine student who weaves house, disco and more in with sounds that honour his heritage. His 2023 release *A Mixtape by Anish Kumar* is a melting pot of sounds and energies, all tied together by his now-signature commitment to bright, sunny rhythms. His secret weapon, though, is the jubilant 'Little Miss Dynamite', which samples Brenda Lee's 1964 track 'Is It True' and turnsit into a sun-soaked house monster. This skill and invention sets Kumar apart as a special new voice in a scene that will only become more influential in 2024. For further reading, check out Surya Sen, Yung Singh and DJ Priya.

ren

ARTISTS WITH THE natural charisma and pure honesty of Ren don't come around too often. The singer hit the headlines at the end of 2022 when he released 'Hi Ren', a track that discusses a range of auto-immune conditions that he was recently diagnosed with, including Lyme disease. The song connected with people due to its unfiltered honesty and Ren's determination to look on the bright side despite years of misdiagnoses.

"Dark topics don't always have to be ugly, and there can be a lot of beauty and richness to be found in those moments," Ren told Rolling Stone UK last year, specifically referencing his track 'Suic*de'. "Sometimes by facing them fearlessly maybe we can understand them better." On debut album *Sick Boi*, he lays out these issues and pushes past them with stunning musicality and a wide range of musical references. Ren has spoken of how his audience have come together, bounded by the "very human thread" of the music and its message. It's impossible not to be moved by this story and the one-of-a-kind singer behind it.

lambrini girls

LAMBRINI GIRLS — Phoebe Lunny and Lilly Macieira — possess the same energy that you'd expect to develop after necking a bottle of the boozy stuff from which they take their name. Unpredictable, chaotic, but ultimately here for a good time, the Brighton duo offer killer riffs and irrepressible energy in songs that rail against the patriarchy and pretty much every form of prejudice going. The inclusive energy at their live shows, meanwhile, is enough to make you leave with a new fire burning deep in your soul. They were nominated for Rolling Stone UK's Rising Star Award in 2023, but in 2024 their talent looks likely to soar into the stratosphere.

"I just think with anything, it's obviously easier to be passionate about something that

affects you directly," Macieira told Rolling Stone UK last year of their open-hearted spirit. "There's nothing necessarily wrong with that. But I think we can all push ourselves a little bit further and think about the people all around us and think about all of these awful things that are going on for trans people specifically at the moment. It's important to be passionate about any issues that diminish anyone's identity and anyone's right to exist."

ANISH KUMAR: REUBEN BASTIENNE-LEWIS; LAMBRINI GIRLS: BRIDIE FLORENCE

nia archives

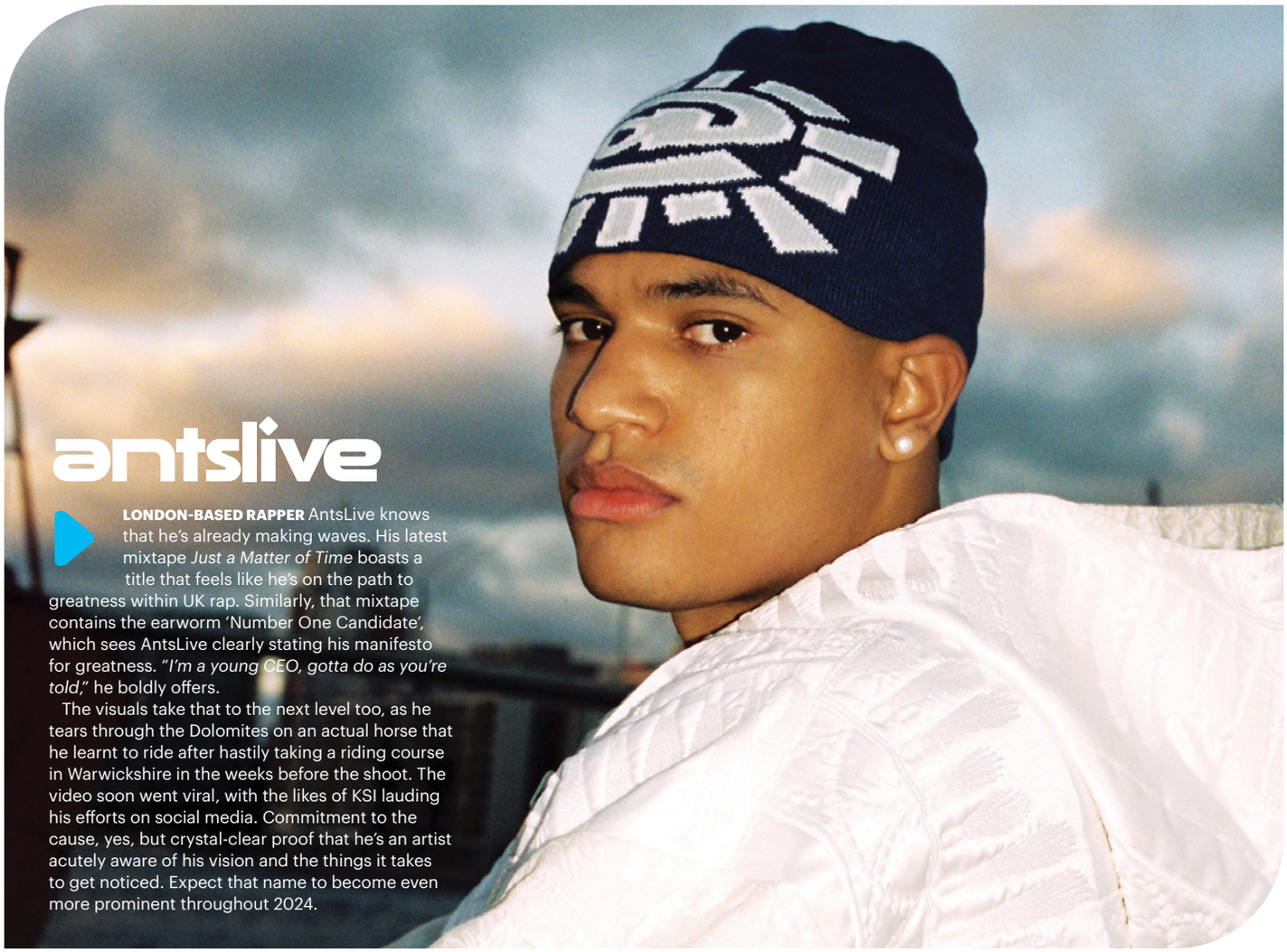
IT TAKES A special kind of artist to spearhead the popular revival of an entire genre of music all by themselves. Jungle has never stopped bubbling away since its 90s heyday, but it's back on the radio now thanks to Nia Archives. The Yorkshire-born, London-based producer's effervescent attitude and boisterous anthems have seen her support Beyoncé and become the sound of festival season in recent years, and her sound is already signature.

A Nia Archives remix is the hottest property around in 2024, as Fred again.. and others can attest, and her ascendance is also spotlighting a continued underappreciation for a genre of music that can be heard in some of the biggest pop hits of the century.

This year will see Nia Archives take her revivalism global, while also pushing things forwards. On radio shows and during raves, Nia has worked to readdress the side-lining of Black women in jungle's past and future, putting in the work as well as lighting up dance floors across the world.

chy cartier

TOTTENHAM RAPPER CHY Cartier joins an exclusive list of musicians from the north London neighbourhood. As well as the obvious Adele, those same streets have been the proving ground for Skepta, JME, Wretch 32, Avelino and more. The area's deep musical heritage — especially in rap — is in safe hands with Cartier, a dextrous and ambitious wordsmith with the thudding beats to back it up. Recent single 'BOSSED UP' is her greatest achievement yet, where an irresistible hook is teamed with bars that are teeming with passion but never rushed. "'BOSSED UP' is about having solid ambition," she said of the song, and hers is immediately apparent. "*Don't wait for nobody*," she says with confidence in the track's spoken-word section, before she launches into yet another fiery verse. Here is the next great voice of the London rap scene.



antslive

LONDON-BASED RAPPER AntsLive knows that he's already making waves. His latest mixtape *Just a Matter of Time* boasts a title that feels like he's on the path to greatness within UK rap. Similarly, that mixtape contains the earworm 'Number One Candidate', which sees AntsLive clearly stating his manifesto for greatness. "*I'm a young CEO, gotta do as you're told*," he boldly offers.

The visuals take that to the next level too, as he tears through the Dolomites on an actual horse that he learnt to ride after hastily taking a riding course in Warwickshire in the weeks before the shoot. The video soon went viral, with the likes of KSI lauding his efforts on social media. Commitment to the cause, yes, but crystal-clear proof that he's an artist acutely aware of his vision and the things it takes to get noticed. Expect that name to become even more prominent throughout 2024.

porij

SINCE EMERGING IN 2020, Porij have constantly shape-shifted to circumstances both internal and external. After adapting to being a new band in a pandemic, they then exited the scene at the same time as losing two founding members in early 2022. Debut album *Teething*, due out on 26 April via PIAS, documents this process and pieces the band back together. "To be perfectly honest, it was terrifying," frontperson Eggy said of the experience. "I remember going through that time feeling like we were sharks: if we stopped swimming, we were gonna die." It's all poured into a debut album that's restorative as well as reactive.

Porij have supported Metronomy on tour in the past and make a similar kind of alluringly wonky pop music. They twist unusual ingredients into catchy alt-pop defined by its exploratory nature. With toes dipped into rave culture, straight-up indie, pure pop, UK garage and beyond, they're an amalgam of the UK's 21st-century musical culture. What's regurgitated by Porij is fresh and fascinating, and they are a brilliant new voice on the pop landscape.

CHY CARTIER: HENRY GOODFELLOW

Barry Can't Swim

On the cusp of a breakout year, Joshua Mainnie talks trusting his instincts, how he finds true originality, and why dance music needs to take itself less seriously

BY WILL RICHARDS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK ALEXANDER

FOR YEARS BEFORE he became Barry Can't Swim, Joshua Mainnie couldn't decide what he wanted. The Edinburgh-raised, London-based musician played every role in multiple indie bands while sharing his love of jazz and electronic music across a host of projects, before he made one of them stick.

"I get very bored very quickly," the Scotsman chuckles over video call from Montreal, where he's heading towards the end of a sold-out tour of North America. Straight afterwards, he'll be into rehearsals for a new live show that will hit London's Roundhouse, Coachella and more. "If I ever started a project and it didn't go in the direction that I wanted within six or nine months, I'd often drop it," he admits now, even saying that "the Barry thing" didn't have much conscious thought put into it at the outset. "When you start this shit, you don't think it's going to become your whole life!" he laughs. "I thought the name was a bit of a funny joke and just ran with it."

Against his natural instincts, it looks like Mainnie will have to remain as Barry Can't Swim for a long time. In the few years since the project's inception, Mainnie has become one of the most buzzy and in-demand figures on the UK's dance music scene, propelled by his eclectic and dazzling debut album *When Will We Land?*, released via Ninja Tune in late 2023. On it, he traverses jazz, club music and beyond with astonishing attention to detail. His live show, meanwhile, has packed rooms at home and abroad, as well as at Glastonbury and beyond.

"What I've been doing has fortunately resonated with people in a certain way, and it's made it easier for me to stay enthused by it," he says. "You want people to enjoy what you do, and if you say you don't, you're kidding yourself. Why are you making music and releasing it outside of your bedroom then?"

In the past few years of the project, Mainnie has turned into a lauded and exciting DJ too, despite only learning the craft out of necessity during the pandemic when he was getting requests to perform DJ sets as Barry Can't Swim and wanted to fulfil them. "It kind of annoys me when people call me a DJ," he says. "I've been playing instruments for decades and was producing for five years before I even touched a set of decks. I really enjoy it now, and it's a total art in itself, but I don't think that being a DJ makes you an electronic musician or vice versa."

His Boiler Room set from his hometown of Edinburgh is packed full of buoyant and playful beats, with Mainnie skipping around the booth with an ever-present grin. It's this infectious energy and fun-loving nature that defines his sets, and it's indicative of a wider trend in dance music in the post-pandemic world: artists are having more fun.

"I've always been somewhat disillusioned by the chin-stroking element of dance music," he says. "I just think it's a bit unnecessary, and a lot of the time artists themselves aren't necessarily like that – it's fans that attach that to us. I've never really had time for that. People are far too concerned with how they are perceived and how they look in that scene, and some of the love is lost along the way."

For an example of the rubbishing of this ethos, look no further than when Barry went b2b with fellow Ninja Tune signing and Manchester-based producer salute (Felix Nyajo) for three-hour shows in Australia at the start of the year. During the sets, which caused roadblocks outside venues in Sydney and Melbourne, Mainnie and Nyajo had the absolute time of their lives while playing both cutting-edge house and club classics, their unrelenting energy bouncing off each other throughout.

"Part of the reason those sets have done quite well [online] is because it's all really sincere," says Mainnie. "We met for the first time in New Zealand just before and went for some pints, and I just came up with the idea of the b2b there and then. We ended up shutting the whole block down! When you're bringing that energy, and it's real, it connects with people."

Alongside this burgeoning DJ career, Barry Can't Swim is also set to bring a new and beefed-up live show across the world in 2024. "It's not a typical electronic music live show," he teases. "It feels really live, and it feels like a band."

TRUSTING GUT INSTINCTS and following what feels good is the guiding principle behind Barry Can't Swim, and this idea is also evident across *When Will We Land?*. Though the music is packed with nuance and detail, it's also a masterclass in trusting your first and scrappiest idea, none more so than on highlight 'Deadbeat Gospel'. The track features the recital of a poem read to Mainnie by old friend and Dublin-based artist somedeadbeat, recorded at the drunken hour of 4am after a Barry Can't Swim show in the city where he and his friend had reconnected after some years out of touch.

The recording is imperfect and scratchy, but it captures the essence of the moment and of Barry Can't Swim's ethos as a whole. Drunken revellers pass by, and lines are messed up, but when the pair tried to record a cleaner and more polished version in the studio for use on the album, the initial energy of the piece was completely sapped.

"It's about happy accidents, right?" says Mainnie, with a smile. "I've thought about this a lot on a deeper level. Happy accidents are the only true form of actual originality. Everything that you're consciously writing or doing is based on what you've heard before. Even the way that music scales in the West are completely different to what they are in India or other places. You can't ever truly do something that's completely fresh and out of the box, because it's all based on what you've already heard. It's in those little moments, when there's some mistake in something when you're producing, or something completely happens by chance and you just didn't mean to do it, that you find something completely true."

He adds, "What people are really asking for in their music isn't something that's hyper-clean and really polished all the time. They want to feel something when they listen to music, and that's why you can still listen to music from 60 or 70 years ago, which objectively speaking is probably recorded pretty badly compared to nowadays. You can still feel so much in it though because it's not really about that: it's about the emotional connection. The fact that ['Deadbeat Gospel'] is on a shit recording transports you further into that moment. Hearing him re-do it in the studio, I just thought, 'This could be anything.'"

This paradox at the heart of Barry Can't Swim is also the thing that is making him a star. His music is deeply considered and lovingly crafted, but simultaneously an unconscious splurge straight from the heart and the hips. He's a deep thinker but also wants to completely let go. What ties it all together, though, is a commitment to not being taken too seriously and having the maximum amount of fun possible. As Mainnie posits: if dance music is meant to make people happy and dance, why wouldn't you also be having fun making it?

"I think it's definitely a trend, but it's not something that I consciously do. Maybe the world is just ready for that and it's just worked in my favour," he says, with the likes of salute, Fred again.. and I. Jordan becoming larger-than-life personalities as well as killer DJs, bringing character and energy back to the booth in a long overdue vibe shift. "The origins of dance music are about community, bringing people together, having fun and sharing an experience on the dance floor," Mainnie says. "Sometimes in the more leftfield lanes of electronic music, that's lost a little bit.

"You can still have fun and enjoy yourself and play credible sets," he smiles, dusting off the shackles of the self-serious purists and hip-shaking his way into a summer that's set to make him a star.

griff

GRIFF IS A student of 21st-century pop music and is set on carving out her own fascinating corner of it. She exists in the lineage of Lorde's hyper-specific and emotional lyricism, as well as Taylor Swift's knack for a killer hook. You can also look to the likes of Grimes and Imogen Heap when tracing the influence of her almost entirely self-produced songs.

As much as she's a pop powerhouse in waiting, she's equally happy being a studio wizard, and twists her catchy songs in off-kilter directions with punchy, leftfield production. On the other end of the scale, she's supported both Coldplay and Dua Lipa on stadium and arena tours respectively, and feels entirely comfortable

taking these bedroom productions to the biggest stages possible.

New EP *vert1go vol. 1* shows a sharpening of her sound and lyrics in that she doesn't settle for a tidy narrative, and this should be furthered on a debut album due in 2024. Griff is leading a new generation of pop stars taking control over their sound and their future, making radio-ready songs with depth and profundity.

high vis

THE MAINSTREAM EXPLOSION of Turnstile in recent years has brought a greater spotlight onto the world of hardcore. The subculture that's thrived underground for decades and occasionally risen above it is experiencing another wave of attention. In the UK, much of that attention is being directed towards High Vis. Though the London five-piece don't sound too much like traditional hardcore — their swirling, melodic songs are closer to Madchester — their ethic is hardcore through and through, as is their background in a countless list of far heavier bands.

As well as their hugely catchy melodies, the thing making High Vis catch on is their unflinchingly honest lyrics, particularly the track 'Trauma Bonds' from 2022 LP *Blending*. On it, vocalist Graham Sayle — who possesses a beautifully gravelly voice from Merseyside — ruminates on the death by suicide of many of his friends and wonders of his remaining companions: "*Are we still lucky to be here?*" At live shows, it's become a rare moment of true catharsis and a bonafide anthem. "People are just attracted to the kind of honesty involved in this stuff," Sayle told Rolling Stone UK last year of hardcore's appeal, and High Vis embody every inch of it.

JAMES MATTHEWS

elmiene

COMBINING ELEMENTS OF classic sounds with neo-soul, Elmiene is winning rightful praise across the globe. This 22-year-old British singer songwriter (aka Abdala Elamin) is a dab hand at contrasting smooth, classic soul with some of the genre's newer greats such as 90s icon D'Angelo. Breakthrough track 'Golden' is the perfect encapsulation of what the artist all about. He's already received praise in high places too, having co-written for Stormzy and worked with Sampha on a number of projects.

"Growing up, I was a quiet only child; I'd spend all day watching people, just observing mannerisms," he told Rolling Stone UK last year. "I felt like soul and R&B was based on observations, things that aren't always obvious to the naked eye — like, 90s neo-soul, Donnie Hathaway's 60s and 70s records, or Stevie Wonder's classic records, they all speak about the unspoken and the unseen in a way that's tangible and so eloquent. It really captured my imagination as a kid: 'This is sick, what's going on?' Stevie and Donnie taught me how to sing; it's in my DNA, my blood."

sprints

WHEN IRISH ROCKERS Sprints released their debut album *Letter to Self* in January, it was clear that we had a rock record that would define the whole year. The spiky, arena-primed riffs of guitarist Colm O'Reilly bound along with the confidence of a band far beyond their tentative years and feel like the kind of stuff that is bound to ignite moshpits for a new generation of rockers at this year's festival season. But there is real depth too. On 'Cathedral', singer Karla Chubb vocalises her battles at being a queer woman growing up underneath the oft-oppressive background of the Catholic church. This fully formed debut and the group's relentless spirit suggests they'll be a defining band in years to come.

SPRINTS: NIAMH BARRY

MARS WASHINGTON

lynks

LYNKS IS A sleazy, hilarious, gimp mask-wearing pop powerhouse. After spending the first three years of the decade sprinkling sexually charged bangers out into the world, developing a reputation as a raucous live performer, and collaborating with Frank Carter & The Rattlesnakes and Metronomy, they will emerge with debut album *Abomination* on 12 April via Heavenly.

On it, they tackle subjects such as the bleak, often banal thrills of riding the DLR to a one-night stand ('(What Did You Expect From) Sex with a Stranger'), and the ageist undertones of sexual proclivity ('Use It Or Lose It'). All these topics are tackled with laugh-out-loud one-liners but an understanding of their importance, too, as Lynks explained to Rolling Stone UK last year: "Writing some songs that were a bit more emotional than, for example, 'How to Make a Béchamel Sauce In 10 Steps', really helped, and they still resonated with people."

It's a rare skill to be able to shoehorn important and vital conversations into songs packed with absurd, filthy jokes, and Lynks hits the sweet spot perfectly. Their message — and their bangers — deserve to blow up in 2024.

the last dinner party

WE'RE ALMOST OUT of superlatives to describe this lot, so let us put it in simple terms: The Last Dinner Party are the most exciting British band to have emerged in a generation. We knew it from the minute we heard the stunning new-wave stomp of their debut single 'Nothing Matters', and we certainly knew it when we gave them their first-ever award, The Rising Star Award, at the Rolling Stone UK Awards, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, last year. The ultimate proof comes in the form of their stunning number-one-charting debut album *Prelude to Ecstasy*, on which stadium-filling anthems rub shoulders with all manner of baroque pop curios.

All of this is to say that they're superstars in the making and most certainly the future of music. "The lyrics, the music, the way we look — none of it is an act or a character. It's all us, but in our platonic form rather than a Ziggy Stardust-type of character. It's us at our full capacity," they recently told Rolling Stone UK of their debut. They're a brilliant live proposition too, with singer Abigail Morris displaying a star quality that's somewhere in between Kate Bush and Freddie Mercury, but entirely her own. We can't wait to see what's next.

CAL MCINTYRE

english teacher

ENGLISH TEACHER'S debut LP *This Could Be Texas* (out 12 April via Island) is a masterclass in mixing modern-day banality (see song titles like 'The World's Biggest Paving Slab') with a wide-eyed desire to burst beyond it.

The band are led by Lily Fontaine — a magnetic frontperson — who gives their guitar music, which ranges from post-punk to 80s indie-pop and beyond, a distinct and exciting personality. In her lyrics, she grapples with identity and inaccurate stereotyping. "*Despite appearances, I haven't got the voice for R&B*," she sings on the band's brilliant debut single 'R&B'. Instead, she fronts a post-punk band that's pushing the genre forwards in new and fresh ways, beyond the late 2010s explosion that threatened to go stale. "It's looking like a very intimidating year," Fontaine told Rolling Stone UK of 2024, during which the band will release their debut album and play their biggest shows to date. Only intimidating for the competition, we'd say.

ENGLISH TEACHER: TATIANA POZUELO

sekou

WITH A FAN BASE that includes the likes of Quincy Jones, Dua Lipa, Anderson Paak and Bruno Mars, Sekou is already attracting attention in all the right places. But take a listen to his latest releases and you'll see why they've all fallen for the soul-flecked talents of the Leicester teenager. His debut EP *Out of Mind* arrived last year and saw soulful edges being balanced against retro pop sounds, while 'Time Will Tell' marked one of his most powerful, stop-you-in-your-tracks moments to date.

"I'm definitely writing towards an album, but it won't come out for another two years," he said. "Albums come and go so quickly nowadays. Artists will drop one, and minutes later everyone has already moved on. Doing an album is bigger than that for me. I want to do one when I know everyone's going to hear it. I definitely want to do another EP. I have a few features in the pipeline, and I worked on a Queen-inspired song with Labrinth. I just want to continue building my audience."

shygirl

THOUGH SHE HAS been an emerging star for years and has a Mercury Prize nomination under her belt for debut album *Nymph*, Shygirl's status as the Future of Music is more justified than ever heading into 2024. The artist – a rapper, singer, curator – began the year by releasing *Club Shy*, her paean to nightlife culture and an extension of the parties she has been throwing worldwide under the same name.

Linked to the worlds of hyper-pop and PC Music but not boxed into them, Shygirl floats between the underground and mainstream radio without having to choose between them. If she wanted to, she has more than enough charisma and lyrical prowess to become a household name though. Instead, she might continue blazing a futuristic, leftfield trail through boundary-pushing music and year-defining parties. Either way, it's impossible to take your eyes off her.

"MY PASSION IN LIFE IS CHILLING"

In the five years since the release of *Father of the Bride*, Vampire Weekend's Ezra Koenig has lived across the world with his family, shed a cynicism that had followed him around since his teens, and made new album *Only God Was Above Us*, the band's most interconnected statement yet — all while discovering a new laidback philosophy

BY WILL RICHARDS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EVA PENTEL

Beginning an album with the lyric *"fuck the world"* is a bold and pointed choice, but Ezra Koenig has a few qualifiers to share.

"THERE'S SOMETHING PROVOCATIVE about opening with that line, but it was important to me that it was in quotation marks," he tells me from the sofa of a plush London hotel, where he's just wrapped his Rolling Stone UK photoshoot. "It says, *'Fuck the world / You said it quiet*'. We're not out here on some Mötley Crüe bad boy shit. 'Middle fingers up, Vampire Weekend's *back*!'"

Rather than a balls-out statement of intent, the lyric that opens 'Ice Cream Piano', the first track from the band's fifth album *Only God Was Above Us*, is a softly sung and solemn admission of cynicism. "It's about somebody who's either talking to someone or arguing with themselves," Koenig says of the song. "They're talking about a fatalism and a cynicism. It's a type of anger at life and at the world – *fuck the world*. There's definitely ambivalence and anxiety in that song, and there is a lot of that in the early songs on the record."

You might not think it from listening to one of the sunniest, most buoyant bands of the 21st century, but cynicism has followed Koenig around since he was a teenager. Vampire Weekend emerged from the post-Strokes indie rock scene of New York City in the late 2000s. Defined by their preppy dress sense and Columbia education, their debut self-titled album from 2008 was full of sprightly rhythms and Koenig's polite, distinctive voice. It spawned generational hits 'A-Punk' and 'Oxford Comma' and set the band – Koenig, now-departed multi-instrumentalist and producer Rostam Batmanglij, bassist Chris Baio and drummer Chris Tomson – on the path to becoming stars of 21st-century indie.

It also sounded like the music of blissfully happy twenty-somethings living their dream, but Koenig tells me there was gloom behind the painted-on smile. "I had a world view from the ages of about 12 to 35: there are good things in the world, but more often than not, there are more bad things, and it's disappointing. I didn't have belief that there was anything beyond that. Looking back, it was a smug, self-satisfied feeling of thinking, 'Yeah, I understand reality.' That doesn't mean I was always in a bad mood, but just had a sense of, 'The world sucks, you can't trust people!'

"You get thrown a few bones by the universe, and that's great – enjoy them while you can, but don't get used to it. That's how I could reconcile the fact that we made happy, fun music at times. Back then, if someone told me that life is inherently meaningful, I'd probably have been a smartarse and said: 'Well, can you prove that?' Later in life, I've realised that it's a choice you make. Your life is inherently meaningful, if you allow it to be."

In the five years after their debut, Vampire Weekend released two more albums – 2010's *Contra* and the critically revered third album *Modern Vampires of the City* – and solidified their place as mainstays of the alternative scene. They were a band with unstoppable momentum, but Koenig says it was all wrapped up in anxiety and worry – if you take your foot off the gas, you'll never get back to this point. It was the six-year gap between *Modern Vampires* and 2019's *Father of the Bride* – a gap their success afforded them – that began to shift the pace and meaning of Koenig's life, as well as welcoming his first child with actor Rashida Jones.

"I was starting to drop the anxiety of my youth which told me you can never wait too long," he reflects. "It was great to spend a lot of time reflecting, because deep down, my passion in life is chilling. It always has been. I even remember in the early days I was talking to another guy in a band who's very intense, making music all the time. We were talking about the future, and at the time I lived in New York, and I can remember saying, 'I think my vibe is just walking on the Upper East Side getting coffee. That's what I want to do.'

"You lose that as you get hyper-fixated on your career, but then as I got older, it returned to me. I was like, 'Right, that's why I work so hard. So that I can have years of idleness and walking around chilling.' I can also create a narrative where I say that all that time allows me to become a better artist and more focused, and I think that's probably true, but above all, it's just what I like to do."

In the five years between *Father of the Bride* and *Only God Was Above Us*, Koenig got plenty of chilling in. During that time, he and his family – until then based in Los Angeles – spent extended periods of time in London, Tokyo and back in New York. Longtime producer and collaborator Ariel Rechtshaid (HAIM, Madonna, Charli XCX) would sometimes come and meet him wherever he happened to be stationed, but the creation of the album largely went at Koenig's own glacial pace. "My wife would be working 14 hours a day, and my son was in school, so I was just out there pounding the pavements of Tokyo, lost in my thoughts," he smiles.

Father of the Bride, released in May 2019, acted as a turning point for Vampire Weekend in multiple ways. It was the band's first album without Batmanglij as a permanent member, and he went on to produce for the likes of Charli XCX, Clairo and HAIM. He still contributed to parts of the band's fourth album but appears on none of *Only God Was Above Us*. It also arrived soon after the birth of Koenig's son, though he admits that listeners' assumption in associating the album title – written before he became a dad – with its perceived subject matter is overplayed. "To me, fatherhood is something that creeps up on you," he reflects. "I talk to people who say, 'The first moment I held my child, everything changed.' I've never had moments like that. It was definitely an important moment, but it's the years after and the overall change of having a family that really changes you."

To promote *Father of the Bride*, Koenig appeared in press photos and interviews alone, blurring the line between Vampire Weekend as a solo project and a band, to the point where many didn't know whether Baio and Tomson would be a part of the band when the tour behind the album began. "There was a lot of figuring out to do, and we talked about it very openly as a band," he explains now. "I felt like we were heading into a headwind. Our indie era was over, our line-up has changed, we're old now. Fourth albums are often slightly difficult. No one talks about a quadrilogy; it's a trilogy!" he exclaims. "I remember thinking that it was going to be a struggle, and we didn't want to look like damaged goods [in the press]. 'All right, what have these guys been up to? Looks a little different!' Me, Chris and Chris will always be a brotherhood and a unit, but it didn't seem like the most useful public-facing unit at that moment."

"I was just out there pounding the pavements of Tokyo, lost in my thoughts"

At the same time as this recalibration, the band were building a new seven-piece live band that would completely transform them. Joined by enigmatic guitarist Brian Robert Jones (Paramore, MUNA), keys player and vocalist Greta Morgan and others, they became an absolute powerhouse on tour with the loose, unrestricted quality of a jam band. "We wanted to present this big, happy family – which it was!" Koenig smiles. "It was a good way of sidestepping a difficult and transitional moment."

On the tour, old songs were given new life, covers were liberally sprinkled into the set (notably an irresistibly funky version of the Koenig-featuring SBTRKT track 'New Dorp. New York'), and it looked like each of the seven members was having the time of their life. During the tour, they played an 11am rarities set on Glastonbury's Park Stage and another morning show at London's Islington Assembly Hall, with coffee and pastries for attendees. At the latter show, they meme-ified their biggest hit, 'A-Punk', by playing it three times in a row.

This new angle to the band also sits well with Koenig's personality. Often wearing the derided get-up of socks and sandals on stage, shitposting online and hosting *Time Crisis*, a laugh-heavy Beats 1 radio show with Jake Longstreth, his sense of humour comes most alive when away from Vampire Weekend's music. During our conversation, he is considered and careful with some answers, leaving long pauses before responding in an erudite manner. To others, he responds instantly with a razor-sharp putdown either at his or others' expense.

"I had a feeling that once we hit the road and did our thing, it'd add another layer to the band," he says of the evolution of Vampire Weekend across their latest tour. "I felt happily validated when we did it. By the time we were selling out the [Madison Square] Garden, we actually were closer than ever. Once we got to this album, [presenting as] the three of us just felt so right. The truth is, I love those guys, and they've given me such an amazing vote of confidence over the years by allowing me to do what I want in the studio." While Vampire Weekend largely remains a Koenig-controlled studio project, he reveals that he, Baio and Tomson are also working on a side project together which he describes as "just the three of us – a bit more democratic".

The changes made in the *Father of the Bride* era affected every facet of the creation of *Only God Was Above Us*. While Koenig was chilling around the world with his family, he would pop into studios in New York and London and implement somewhat of an open-door policy for collaborators. At Andrew Watt's studio in New York, he was joined by Dev Hynes of Blood Orange, who rocked up with a broken arm after a footballing accident. "At first he tried playing something on bass, but it was too awkward to play with his cast," Koenig laughs, with Hynes then offering the even more outlandish proposition of getting behind the drum kit. The unorthodox tubthumping that followed now appears on the bright and melodic 'Prep-School Gangsters', and Koenig credits the contribution as "the key to unlocking the song".

In his time away from the studio, he walked around cities worldwide listening to mixes and texting Rechtshaid "getting excited about LP6," and introduced Jones and Hynes to his new jam band obsession by bringing them along to a Phish gig at Madison Square Garden. "I threw them in the deep end, and everybody had a ball!" he laughs, crediting his time not working

as having equal importance to the finished album as the logged studio hours.

Sonically, this freedom can be felt all over *Only God Was Above Us*. The album traverses every era of Vampire Weekend – the major key joy of their earliest work, the dark and muddy tones of *Modern Vampires* and the baggier excess of *Father of the Bride* – and becomes their definitive statement to date. Even when singing about his cynical mind on 'Classical', the joyous music lifts him out of the rut, as if his new enlightened self is talking to the younger, downtrodden Koenig. 'Gen-X Cops' is a punk-infused track full of bluster, while the slowies ('The Surfer', 'Pravda') still bring lightness.

"We've always been called an indie band, and often an alternative band, but I just think we don't have that much connection to what people think of as being classically alternative," he says of the album's sonic identity. "It was starting to seem more interesting to me to discover whether we can still sound like Vampire Weekend with some, like, bigger, harder, more distorted moments. More 'alternative' moments, for lack of a better term." Though punk has always been in the mix on some of their biggest hits ('Cousins', 'Diane Young'), it feels more raw and unhinged here, most notably on the runaway train that is 'Gen-X Cops' and its wiry guitar line.

Though Koenig is still unpacking what the album means to him – "I always wish you could do the press for an album five years after it comes out!" – he is keen on presenting it as an interconnected addition to the Vampire Weekend collection. "I look at the first album as the first chapter of the same story, and I'm very grateful that each album provides context. The older you get and the longer you stick around as a band, the more you'll get different parts of your fan base who are discovering different albums for the first time. You'll still get people who stick [2008 film] *Step Brothers* on and hear 'A-Punk' for the first time and think, 'Who's this?!' That'll probably always be our biggest song, but people are still discovering it.

"No matter what, as you grow older, things change," he reflects. "That's what's most important. You roll with the punches, and you deal with change. You experience a different dimension of life, whether that's fatherhood or whether you never have kids. There's just something about being on this ride together."

"I can think of many times in my life where I very much related to the 'fuck the world' mentality"

The title of the new album started as a coincidence. Koenig had discovered a host of images taken in the 80s by photographer Steven Siegel, one of which particularly took his eye. In it, a man reads a newspaper on a graffiti-strewn New York subway. The front-page headline reads: "ONLY GOD WAS ABOVE US."

"I knew that it should be the album cover, and there is so much empty space on it for text," Koenig says. After trying and failing to find a suitable space to put the band's name and a potential album title, he settled on leaving Vampire Weekend off the cover and lifting the one single piece of text in the image for its title. "At first, it wasn't that deep. I said, 'Let's just call it that.'" As time went on, the singer began to increasingly view it as a "special" name and "the perfect title for the songs". Quite a while later, he finally thought to himself: 'That's a weird newspaper headline. I wonder what it's about.'

The headline was printed in the *New York Daily News* in April 1988, the day after a plane flying over Hawaii had its roof torn off in a crash. In an interview after the event, a survivor used the immortal words when recounting the traumatic accident. "It's a pretty poetic way to describe the roof being ripped off your plane!" Koenig giggles.

On 8 April, Vampire Weekend will launch *Only God Was Above Us* at a special outdoor show at Austin, Texas' Moody Amphitheatre at noon, the time of a total eclipse. Koenig was told about the incoming event by a friend seven years ago, and the date stuck in his mind immediately: it will be his 40th birthday.

"We were talking to one of the promoters about the show, and the guy said, 'Wow, so cool how it ties into the album!' I remember thinking at the time, 'Ties into the album? It's just randomly my birthday? How does it tie in?' He said, 'Only God Was Above Us! This big cosmic event will be happening right above the crowd!' I was like, 'Damn, you're right.'"

As with everything regarding *Only God Was Above Us*, it all just seems to fit. The album closes with 'Hope', an eight-minute triumph ("It's no 'Murder Most Foul'!" Ezra laughs of Bob Dylan's 17-minute epic track) that presents the core of his new world view. "*I hope you let it go*," he sings over and over as its refrain, reflecting on a life being bogged down by suspicion and distrust and basking in the new way he's found to live. He's already thinking about Vampire Weekend's sixth (and seventh) albums, but if it were the band's last ever song, it would sum it all up impeccably.

"Every five years of my life, I can look back and say, 'Well, that was defined by changes in this way, or I started to feel more like this,'" he says. "Have things changed in my life? Sure. Is that always clearly reflected in the music? That's harder to say. You get the songs you get, you know? You could sit down and want to write about where you're at in your life, but it doesn't always work out that way. With this album, though, I do think there's some sort of reflection and some type of maturity."

He describes the journey from 'Ice Cream Piano' to 'Hope' as "a journey from cynicism to optimism; from scepticism to faith," and it's borne out on an album that presents all sides. "I think all those things are true, and I do feel like that's a journey I've been on. I can think of many times in my life where I very much related to the 'fuck the world' mentality, if only in the sense of being continually disappointed by things beyond my control, and not recognising the extent to which there was another way to live," he reflects as we wrap our time together. "That's a lifelong journey, and I don't want to pretend I'm no longer disappointed by anything, but when I was young, I was the epitome of a cynical, rational, pessimistic materialist. Being older now, all I know is that I'm not that anymore."

Too mu loc

BAND TOGETHER
(from left) Bardon (Ben Rose), Fiona (Freya Parks), Dante (Levi Brown) and Jeannie (Eve Austin)

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Peaky Blinders *writer Steven Knight's latest creation* This Town *takes viewers back to the Midlands of the 80s, telling the story of a group of disenfranchised young people for whom music is the only way out*

By Sophie Porter

© BBC

In 1981, Britain was at crisis point

THE NATION HAD entered the second year of a recession which saw over 2.5 million people standing in line for the dole, and the threat of miners' walkouts and the IRA hunger strikes put maximum pressure on the newly instated Thatcher administration. Tensions were running high, with Black and Asian communities enduring an increase in racist attacks and police harassment as the force exercised hefty misuse of stop-and-search powers. As a result, following April's Brixton Uprising, that summer saw riots rage across the Midlands, Liverpool, Leeds and Manchester.

This is the bleak landscape in which *Peaky Blinders* creator Steven Knight has set *This Town*, his latest love letter to the Midlands. While *Peaky Blinders* touched on similar themes of community, working-class lives and social turbulence, *This Town* centres on the youth experience in an era much closer to Knight's heart. It features a group of characters he feels he could have grown up with, who demonstrate tenacity in the face of violence and uncertainty.

Set primarily between Coventry and Birmingham, *This Town* draws us into the world of an extended family and their wider network who are brought back together by the death of a key figure. It focuses on the paths of four young people as they collectively turn to music as a "lifeboat" and form a band. Getting famous is the only option in the face of familial tension, their only means of escaping the desolate destinies of people who come from a very particular kind of place.

TROUBLED TIMES (from left) Bardon, Gregory (Bolger) and Dante

© ROBERT VIGLASKY

ONE OF THE four main characters and band members is Dante Williams, an 18-year-old college student and aspiring poet for whom the adjective 'weird' is thrown around frequently. Played by newcomer Levi Brown, he is seemingly out of step with the rest of the world at a time when visual identity and alignment is vital, but he speaks with conviction and integrity and comes to music as a means of carrying his words.

Brown is joined by *Peaky Blinders* alumnus Jordan Bolger as his on-screen elder brother Gregory Williams, a member of the Birmingham Zulus (a gang associated with football hooliganism) turned soldier. When we first meet him in *This Town*, he's returned to Chelmsley Wood Estate on compassionate leave for the funeral. Having been stationed in Belfast during the height of the Troubles, a time characterised by the IRA hunger strikes, he is plagued with trauma and survivors' guilt.

We're reminded further of the political and social unrest that characterised the period just after Gregory has come home. For his own protection, Dante is not allowed out, for fear of the trouble he might get into. "Dad keeps me in," Dante tells Gregory.

Ahead of the service, there's a pivotal moment between Dante and their father (played by Nicholas Pinnock) in which he assures Dante he'll be "opening up the box... but just a lickle". His dad then proceeds to unveil one of his old suits, a relic from his days as a "bad boy" in Kingston, Jamaica. A sharp black pinstripe, double-breasted, white sock, black shoe, black tie, trilby hat ensemble, it is the epitome of the logo of 2 Tone, one of the familiar music genres of the early 80s. As Dante dresses in the suit for the funeral, he comments that it doesn't even look like him. He looks like a Rudeboy yet knows nothing of what that means – of its

MEAN STREETS
The series recreates the social tensions of the 80s

association with the working-class teens of the 60s, noted for listening to ska and for their reckless delinquency.

The suit introduces Dante to the divisive territory that comes with aligning yourself with a 'tribe' at a time when there were prominent and easily identifiable factions of youth, each of whom had an individual purpose, but all of whom were frustrated, and all of whom believed they were right.

"He [Dante] says when he puts on the hat he feels like dancing. And I think dancing for him doesn't just mean dancing to a song, it means living life and getting into trouble," says Brown.

This moment is a purposeful one. Dante is not representative of any group, neither does he champion any particular cause – except by accident, "and that's the point," Knight stresses, "just by accident", he conforms to a look which was current. Dante is a very one-off person. He doesn't seek the suit as a means of fitting in with the movement at large; instead "it happens to him". Knight continues, "I think that I wanted him to represent the creative people who usually create these movements. If you think of Bob Dylan as an example, where he wasn't going around talking about the peace movement, about Vietnam or anything, he just was that person somehow. And as a consequence of that, everybody gravitated around him."

But at this point in the show, Dante is exposed to the consequences of his aesthetic when he breaks his composure over a hat and ends up in a bar brawl.

"He's a troubled young man, and he's living in a very chaotic world," explains Brown, putting this lapse in cool down to the perceived naivety of the character, "Working-class kids just had to grow up so quickly."

Dante is frogmarched from the pub by Gregory, at which point a poignant conversation – perhaps more akin to a desperate warning – begins between the siblings and their cousin, Bardon (played by Ben Rose), the son of an active IRA Provo who launders red diesel to fund shipments of arms and bomb-making ingredients in Coventry. It focuses on the premeditation of their lives based on where they're from, how they look, and their background. It's a theme that still feels current today.

> ***"He's a troubled young man living in a chaotic world"***
> ***— Brown***

"I think people are still facing that, 100 per cent," says Bolger of that particular scene. For him, who was born in Coventry, the script felt close to home, like it was written for him. He remembers Coventry as a "vibrant" place despite its lack of opportunities, a city where "you need to make choices and you need to make the right choices," which ultimately prepared him for the rest of his life. He still experiences negative reactions to his Coventry upbringing to this day.

In *This Town*, the brothers' means of a 'way out' are representative of the seemingly only – extreme – options available to low-income youth, something which again doesn't seem to have changed all that much. "I think that's still kind of the struggles that the working-class community are faced with every day, every year. Each generation," says Bolger. "You can make money, but if you don't have financial literacy and guidance, then the money isn't going to get

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TAKE ME AWAY (above) Dante with Jeanie; (below) music is an escape for Dante

put into the things that can support you and be sustainable. So, yeah, you hope that you get into sport, you hope you get into some kind of avenue that can take you away. And the military, I think, has been one that has probably been there for a long time, for people who don't have that many options."

Bolger then makes a comparison to those who grow up in affluent families. "If you grow up with a silver spoon, you grow up with people guiding you. You don't have to have so much vision and scope and [to] look out for the dangers and the opportunities. But when you grow up with not being given so much, you have to do a lot with the little you have. You have to make your decisions smart."

This concept of "destiny" based on your background is a major theme throughout the series and highlights Knight's unrivalled ability to tell stories which exist in the grey areas of life and which relay the complexities of living in a tumultuous landscape, where people argue about who is right and who is wrong, both politically and within the realm of family allegiance, and the lengths they'll go to in order to protect what is theirs. Knight validates the search for community, identity and belonging, and the things people do and the places they go in search of that, with real heart and humility – even if these things sit outside the norm of what is seen as 'right'. To quote a poignant line from the show, the things that are "illegal, not inhuman". This ties in with the working-class experience Knight often explores within his work, having come up through the estates of Birmingham himself.

"There are certain things that are illegal that people do that everybody's fine with, you know, because they're essential – you have to do those illegal things," he says. "And so, the law doesn't match the morality of yourself and everybody around you. You know, you've got a different law."

Bolger expands on the theme. "When you look at the working-class experience, there are some things that are so normal to a working-class community because it's 'you have to.'" He praises Knight's inclusion of these themes in the series, and his writing in general, and how he makes a point of humanising them, "because I think it would be quite easy to go, 'It's wrong. People shouldn't do it.' But when you have the 'whys' and the 'hows', it makes it way more understandable." The series addresses how difficult it is to progress if you are born into these kinds of circumstances, and how the need for community is key to getting there. While the middle class, or upper middle classes, have their own sets of rules and are united and "know what they're doing", the series reflects the importance of knowing your own structure as a way of being strong in the face of adversity.

"It's what *Peaky*'s about, and it's what this is about as well," Knight explains, "it's not trying to accept a system of judgement where 'isn't it a shame' or 'isn't it awful' applies to particular ways of being that just happened to be different."

But the working-class experience portrayed in *This Town* isn't purely bleak. In the early production meetings, Knight was keen for the council estates to look beautiful, like somewhere that "everybody wants to live," in order to represent the subjective point of view of the people who were involved and to share an accurate history of the people who were living there at the time. "It's where I grew up and it's not awful," he says, "it's actually great. It's a laugh." Beyond the grit, the violence and the struggle, is vibrancy, creativity and resourcefulness. These themes are key to the progress of the lead characters, whether it's Jeanie, a skinhead and band member, who records tapes at parties because she can't afford to buy them, or Bardon offering up a "guitar, a tin whistle and a big fucking Irish drum", in order for the cousins to write something that somewhat resembles a song.

Among all this is the theme of love in all its various shades, which functions as both a means and a cause for the characters. "This thing is about people falling in love with each other," says Knight. "But also, when it gets gritty and nervous and difficult, love is still in there somewhere and it's still doing its job."

For Bolger, it's central. "They've got the personal people that they're living for, they're doing things for. And doing the things they don't want to do as well, whether it's fighting

addictions or fighting people. They're doing it for someone," he says.

But in the case of Dante, love turns the focus away from life's desolate reality. Knight talks about history as not standing back from the painting but being *in* the painting, and the tunnel vision Dante develops when writing a song for a girl he likes is a truly honest rendition of what life would have been like for young people at that time. The naivety of the teenager is equal to a kind of resilience. Brown says, "There was a lot of noise, and I think the naivety is... Dante is aware of all that, but I think he just chooses to ignore it. To do your own thing as a teenager or as a young person is terrifying."

FAST-FORWARD TO 2024, then, and the politics of today feel hauntingly similar to the state of this country in 1981 and the preceding years. In a post-everything Britain – Brexit, the pandemic, Trump, Black Lives Matter – the population sits on a sliding scale of apathy and rage, demoralised by 14 years of Tory rule, and the rise once more of far-right ideologies. Demonstrations blaze across the country as a result of Israel's ongoing assault on Palestine, the cost of living crisis is crippling families, and anti-immigration rhetoric is fanning the flames of division, all of which marks the beginning of an incredibly tense election year.

Rather than hitting our screens as a mere object of retro fascination, *This Town* simultaneously offers poignant reminders and a glimmer of hope in the form of music and the band at the centre of the action. While Knight doesn't ever write with an agenda, he describes today's world as "difficult and a little bit bleak". He talks about hope and its usual source coming from young people, but how he doesn't feel that right now. "You feel that division and people separating themselves and deciding that they're this or they're that, and the problem is that the idea of coming together is now corny or sentimental. But the point is, a show like this is suggesting that the thing that can possibly be a trigger for getting rid of that is music."

It is through music that we are shown that despite the racial tensions of that time – and this – harmony is possible. Its central characters, Dante and Gregory, are both Black, their dad is from Jamaica, and their mum is from Coventry, while their cousin is Irish – but all that, as Knight points out, is irrelevant. "It was nothing to do with race. It was to do with music."

He illustrates the point with his own personal experience. In 1981, Knight was in his early twenties. While it was a time of social upheaval, for him that period was about Birmingham City football matches ("which we'd probably lost"), followed by a trip to the pub, where, inevitably, a lot of young people would be causing trouble, but there would be this music which seemed "to fit as if it was designed for that moment".

He recalls how music acted as a unifier: "It was just people who were from Birmingham and Coventry, from the same estates, the same places, who liked the same music. So, they naturally got together and listened to the same music. When ska first came, it was the music that skinheads were listening to, and it was the music that young Black people were listening to, and there was that thing – that music united them." He recalls vividly that these conversations didn't happen deliberately, but that it was just people not doing something stupid, "which was to identify each other according to race. It was the abstinence of that stupidity. And that's what I think was so remarkable about it."

> ***"It was nothing to do with race. It was to do with music"***
> ***— Knight***

The soundtrack of the series encompasses a fairly broad mix of genres and styles, touching on ska, reggae, 2 Tone, new wave and punk, including prominent artists and bands of that era. (Despite the title of the drama and its similarity to the opening lyric of The Specials' 1981 hit 'Ghost Town', it does not feature.) The tracks chosen perfectly capture the zeitgeist of the time and provide the landscape in which we find our cast. They mark the peak of a youth movement and its commentary which inspired hope in the form of community and of music as an 'out' – themes which lie at the very heart of *This Town*. While Knight makes it clear that music is pivotal to This Town's narrative, the show isn't a "forensic examination" of music history; rather, it has everything to do with the possibilities that music inspired.

My conversations with Bolger and Brown inevitably turn to the legacy of the music of this period, 2 Tone in particular, and the show's resonance with the modern viewer. "I think it's going to be quite nice for people at this point in time where there are so many pressures in so many different ways to look back at a sort of slightly simpler time that wasn't so long ago where something so simple as music and a love of music brought people together who were very divided before that point, and to just sort of look at it and go, 'It is possible and it is possible in this era. We're not so far from this right now.' So, it gives some hope," says Bolger.

Brown ruminates on this notion too, with both actors recalling their experiences more recently of music operating as a unifying force. Whether that's at Northern Soul nights for Bolger, or a Kendrick Lamar gig for Brown, in both instances a collective act of dancing and singing has brought a commonality between a breadth of different people, from different places, at different points in their lives.

"Maybe there will be something that comes out that just kind of makes everyone go, 'Oh my God. Like, you can't not like this. This is something that is speaking for us.' And I do think we're in a time now where maybe one song could do that or maybe a new genre will be born out of it. But I don't know... you never know with music. You never know," Brown muses. "And that's why it's so bloody great."

EXIT STRATEGY
Gregory has tried to rewrite his fate by becoming a soldier

© BBC

Kristen Stewart

Uncensored

After more than two decades in the spotlight, Stewart knows who she is — and what she wants

BY ALEX MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLIER SCHORR

Kristen Stewart is strong as fuck,

and I do not mean this metaphorically. I am not, for instance, talking about any experience from her past that she has quote-unquote risen above, like that time she was in those vampire-werewolf movies and dubbed the World's Most Hated Actress because she did not appear sufficiently stoked to sit in a room full of journalists and discuss making out with her co-stars. Or the time she was photographed kissing her much older (and married) *Snow White and the Huntsman* director, and, due to the horror this engendered, was banished from the sequel. I am not talking about the bravery it took to play Joan Jett in front of Joan Jett. Or the bravery it took to play Princess Diana in front of the entire moviegoing world. Or the bravery it took to come out on *SNL* in the form of a snappy retort to the mean tweets of a demented reality-show host turned president. In other words, I am not talking about "strength" as the gold-star descriptor given to famous women who don't crumble beneath the other labels society lobs at them. No. I am talking, quite literally, about Kristen Stewart's biceps.

OK, let me back up. It's an early afternoon in January. We're on a large deck perched neatly on a hillside of Los Feliz, with a commanding view of tropical foliage. The weather has reverted to that bland meteorological perfection endemic to Los Angeles, despite a morning that was topsy-turvy, bringing down a small tree in Stewart's yard. "Wtf kinda crazy witch energy you bring to LA?!!" read an email waiting in my inbox when I awoke. "It's crazy out there!" It was the latest message in a chain we'd started to try to figure out what to do on our second day together, though the back-and-forth had quickly devolved (evolved?) into a series of book and article recommendations and Stewart's confession that, when it comes to these types of interviews, "the disco anxiety *is* real."

Eventually, she invites me along to what she'd planned to do anyway that afternoon: kickbox with her trainer Rashad. We are ostensibly meeting so she can promote *Love Lies Bleeding*, a romantic thriller directed by Rose Glass, in which Stewart plays a gym manager lusting after a bodybuilder (played by Katy O'Brian) who, as Stewart describes it, "comes in and shakes up the Coke can, but it fucking explodes and everyone gets messy" ("messy" being the quaintest way possible to describe the bloody, sweaty, id-driven hellscape that follows). In this context, kickboxing is the sort of cliché, movie-promotion-adjacent thing Stewart would usually refuse to do, and therefore, we figured, the most subversive thing she could do. "Less talk, more rock," she advised.

By now, it's pretty well established that "subversive" is Stewart's thing. Imagine her, aged 17, refusing to play Bella Swan in the perky, bright-eyed manner the adults all had in mind, and choosing instead to mope around like she was *actually in love with an undead person*. ("The studio was trying to make a movie for kids. They didn't want what actually was the book. When the fuck are [Bella and Edward] smiling, ever?") Then, having spent five years on a franchise that earned more than $3.5 billion worldwide, spawned such things as *Twilight*-branded blow dryers, and momentarily made Stewart the highest-paid actress in the world, there was the transition once and (mostly) for all to art-house indies – which she'd been making in between all those *Twilight* instalments, sometimes shooting three or four movies a year. There was *Clouds of Sils Maria*, for which she turned down the part of the starlet in favour of the slightly grubby assistant, and proceeded to win a César (the French equivalent of the Oscar), the only American woman to have done so. There was *Spencer*, which earned her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress for so artfully crawling out of her own skin. After we hung out, she was headed to Park City, Utah, where she was being honoured with a Visionary Award while premiering her 11th and 12th Sundance films – *Love Lies Bleeding* as well as *Love Me*, a post-apocalyptic romance in which she plays a buoy to Steven Yeun's satellite ("Basically, the internet – the knowable universe – is contained in this machinery, and they start trying to figure out how to date," she explains). "We were starting to film, and it can be a very tense scene," Yeun tells me of working with Stewart on such an unconventional project. "She just put her hand on my shoulder and was like, 'Hey, I like you.' And that just melted away all the brain fog. She's very deep and cool that way."

That depth and cool have long made Stewart a go-to choice for countercultural roles, women who stand out because they are at a remove from whatever world envelops them. But they are also the qualities behind Stewart's ability to make characters seem countercultural by virtue of the fact that she is playing them, bringing a reserve and restraint that might seem like underkill in a franchise in which she has to speak, out loud, lines like "Hello, biceps!" but that scintillates in more nuanced fare. "She understands how people cover, and she is able to play that, which makes her work so interesting and different," says Jodie Foster, who began shooting *Panic Room* with Stewart when she was 10. "I remember just being in awe of this kid."

By the time I arrive at her house, Stewart, now 33, has been up for many hours. There was a spell when she had "a very fucked-up relationship with sleep", but now she goes to bed early and rises early, waking up to work with fiancée Dylan Meyer on one of the many projects being spearheaded by Nevermind, the production company the two founded with producer Maggie McLean in 2023. (Stewart tells me that it wasn't named after the Nirvana album per se, but that they do share the band's urge to "somehow slip in and fuck shit up for the better".) "Me and Dylan are writing something, so the first three hours, we treasure them. Our brains are just working well at that time," Stewart says. "When she moved into this house, I had no curtains, three forks, and I never drank coffee, and I was like, 'I don't sleep.' She's like, 'In the morning, you drink coffee and you work, and you're alive, and you're awake, and

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then at night you close the curtains.' In retrospect, it was so obvious."

When Stewart leads me outside, Meyer is already on the deck, limbering up in a white New Order T-shirt while Rashad arranges yoga mats and free weights. Soon Stewart has a playlist going, and Rashad is having us "separate our shoulder blades and engage our core" to the croons of Vivien Goldman as Stewart's black rescue mutt, Cole, meanders between the mats. We stretch. We shadowbox. Then comes the moment Stewart had warned me about: the chin-up competition on a free-standing contraption set up on the deck. I do approximately zero. Meyer manages several. Stewart does chin-up after chin-up after chin-up, then switches to a different grip and does some more, as we all look on admiringly.

"You should know that Kristen is good at everything. It's both inspiring but also annoying," Meyer says to me quietly without a hint of actual annoyance.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go!" Rashad screams. "You're strong as fuck, let's go!"

Stewart finally drops from the bar, panting.

She flashes that famous sideways grin, and then glances towards the body pads: "Let's get in the ring."

IT HAD BEEN A SUBVERSION of the idea of a "strong woman" that led Stewart to *Love Lies Bleeding*, she'd told me a few weeks earlier, sitting in her living room on a black leather sofa under large metal letters that spell out "ASS". This afternoon, it is witchy raining, and the view out of the glass doors barely goes past the deck, where in addition to the pull-up stand, there is a claw-foot bathtub Stewart had moved from one of the bathrooms and hooked up outside ("It breaks a lot, but it's really fucking nice to take a bath out there"). Unimposing from the outside, the house slopes down the hillside elegantly, but is haphazardly furnished and a little unkempt. Across from the sunken living room – where a white plastic mannequin perches on a bench laid out with stacks of Nevermind scripts and papers – there is a wall of books to one side (Mary Shelley, Jack Kerouac, Kim Gordon, Kathy Acker) and a sort of games room to the other, complete with an orange-topped pool table, a *Playboy* pinball machine, a row of metal lockers, and a refrigerator with a large orange biohazard sticker on the door. A room off the kitchen boasts a crumbling sofa, a drum kit and a collection of acoustic and electric guitars. Near the stairs, water stains mark the ceiling, and the words "life is beautiful" are graffitied in bright-red paint.

"Just so you know, that 'life is beautiful' thing – do you know Mr Brainwash?" Stewart motions wryly to the graffitied wall. "He came over with a friend of mine and did this, and I was like, 'So, I know that I do sort of live in a frat house, but that is psychotic.' Do you know what I mean? To think that you could just do that to someone's fucking house." During the pandemic, Stewart graffitied the word "MAINLY" underneath in all caps. "Anyway," she continues, shrugging, "just to contextualize that: fuck that guy."

Stewart bought the house about 12 years ago, as a place to "go hide in" during a breakup with Robert Pattinson, back when they were both having to ride around in the trunks of cars to try to thwart the prying paparazzi. In a theoretical way, she understands the interest people still have in that relationship – she really does – but as she'll later tell me: "Rob and I can't just keep talking about that shit, because it's fucking weird. It's like if someone kept asking you – I mean for literally decades – 'But senior year in high school?' You're like, 'Fucking A, man! I don't know!'"

Whatever her reserve on film, today Stewart has an excitable, spring-loaded quality. Soon after we begin talking, she wanders off, without preamble, to change from black leather workman's shoes into sneakers ("I'm a soft-shoe guy. I went somewhere today and got dressed or whatever, but now I'm like, 'Why the fuck am I in these big shoes?'"). A few minutes later, she wanders off again ("She just keeps walking away from me," she narrates from my perspective), and returns from the biohazard fridge with two Coors Lights. "You can have a beer if you want," she announces. "I'm going to have one."

"It was really fun to be allowed to have the little, dikey sister be the main protagonist"

We crack open the cans. She returns to the sofa. She wears a worn, black T-shirt with holes in both armpits, baggy black jeans and chipped black nail polish. Her mullet is pulled into a short ponytail at the back of her head, dark strands escaping errantly.

"Do you already know what you're–" she stops herself. "I know actors are defensive. I don't mean this, like, 'Do you already know what you're going to write?' But are you already – I don't know – a little outlined or something?"

No, I tell her. We only just met. How could I know what the contours of the story would be?

"OK, cool." She leans towards me, legs wide and elbows on her knees. "We'll figure something out."

There's a lot to say about *Love Lies Bleeding*, so we might as well start there. And here's how that went: Stewart was in London for the premiere of *Spencer*. The morning after, having not slept a wink ("We were really Englanding out"), she came down to the lobby of her swanky "press junket" hotel for a meeting with director Rose Glass, whose debut film, *Saint Maud* – a psychological fever dream about religious obsession – Stewart had loved. They sat at a table off to one side. They sipped tea. Glass explained that her takeaway of what people wanted from her next was a film about a strong woman, a strong lead character.

"What does that mean?" Stewart asks now, narrowing her eyes. "It's bullshit. It means that we're not actually letting women define themselves. It's the assumption that we need to be empowered by the people deciding who gets to have perspective, that we have to provide something aspirational. It's the lowest-hanging fruit there is." Glass told her that she had figured out a way to subvert that expectation: she had taken the note literally. "She was like, 'Strong girl? Bodybuilding. Got it.' Simple as that."

By the time she left the meeting, Stewart knew she would take the part that Glass had written with her in mind – the role of Lou, the gym manager, who is butch and tough and closed like a fist, until the bodybuilder, Jackie, explodes her whole world – but she didn't officially sign on until she'd returned to LA and read the script. "I had some friends over for dinner when I got the message," says Glass of receiving the news. "I think I was a bit drunk already. I just remember there being lots of very jubilant shouting and excited jumping up and down."

Afterwards, Stewart finished the campaign expected of Oscar-nominated actors ("It becomes like you're teaching a curriculum on your movie") and then flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where *Love Lies Bleeding* would film, showing up at Glass's house with a stylist to lay waste to Diana's blonde hair, even grabbing the scissors at the end to make it look like Lou had cut her mullet herself. "Once I cut my hair, I was like, 'See you, forever,'" Stewart says of leaving *Spencer* behind.

Lou was a very different story – a character whose seedy, pumped-up world could not have been more different from Princess Diana's gilded cage, whose sex scenes were about female pleasure and female bodies alone, who wasn't aspirational or going on some journey of self-discovery, and who was not at all the type of person about whom movies are generally made. "It was really fucking fun to be allowed to have the little, dikey sister be the main protagonist in a movie," Stewart says. "That's never the main character in a movie. That's never the one that you want to fuck. I mean, that's the one some people do, but not the one that you are prescribed to want to fuck."

As an openly gay movie star – "and there aren't that many openly gay movie stars" – it felt personal in a way Stewart hadn't quite expected: a queer film that didn't revolve around the "coming out" narrative, and in which the queerness was less a plot point than a vibe. She has long talked about roles as not a form

NIKE

of escapism, but rather a means of exploring different facets of her identity – imagining who she might be if her "nature" had been exposed to an entirely different "nurture". But playing Lou felt like a return to her "first setting", she tells me. "It is a really weird, kind of moving return to form in some way. Kind of like who you are when you're 11 – physically, the clothes you choose to wear – before you've just been pummelled by male expectation."

She takes a swig of beer and leans back into the sofa. "I never have felt like I have performed a femininity in order to reap its benefits in a way that felt like a lie," she continues. "I'm very fluid, and I've never felt like, 'Oh, wow, I was doing this lie for a long time in order to get jobs.' That would be wrong. I have had a good time playing with all of the tonal qualities. But there's so much room for success when you choose the girlie one. There's no room for this other one."

OK, LET ME BACK UP AGAIN. Because nurture does matter, here are some broad strokes.

Stewart grew up in the Los Angeles suburb of Woodland Hills. Her dad was a stage manager who worked on shows like the Oscars and *Fear Factor*, and when Stewart went to work with him, she hated it – all the rushing around and commotion ("I would hide in the engineers' room and play bass with them"). Her mum was a script supervisor who worked on movies like *Mortal Kombat* and *Little Giants*, and when Stewart went to work with *her*, she loved it – the quiet and stillness, the feeling of everyone working together to suspend some fragile bubble of make-believe. When she was eight, and because she had noticed acting was the only job kids could have that allowed them to miss school, she asked her mum to take her to an audition seminar, one of those one-stop shops where you get headshots and the promise of being connected to some agents if you don't suck too much. Stewart – whose drama experience up to that point consisted of reenacting scenes from *Titanic* on the jungle gym at school – found that she didn't.

She booked a Porsche commercial. Then she booked *The Safety of Objects*. Then David Fincher saw the Porsche commercial and had his people track her down, and she booked *Panic Room*. "I mean, everybody said at the time, 'Look, if this kid wants to continue to do this, she's absolutely got the acumen; she's got the sensitivity,'" Fincher tells me. "But when you're standing next to Jodie Foster, and the question for a 10- or 11-year-old is 'What do you want to do with the rest of your life?' – you know, Jodie's extremely protective of people who are not capable of making those decisions: 'She doesn't need to think about that. She needs to think about what we're doing before lunch.'"

Anyway, there was only so much Foster could do: when shit hit the fan for Stewart, career prospects had nothing to do with it. Puberty did. "It's as soon as I started to want to have sex," Stewart specifies of the moment when she went from being like "everything's fucking gravy" to suddenly feeling like "I can't find the words and I want my face to be on the back of my head instead of the front." She takes another gulp of Coors: "Puberty is a real fucker."

There are a few core memories here: the time she went to school with her legs unshaved and someone was like, "*Eeeewwww*"; the time she accidentally hit a friend in the nuts, and he howled "Oh, you fucking *man*!"; the way guys treated her girlie friend Britni vis-à-vis the way they treated her. "I was immediately aware that these guys who I was friends with saw me as not fuckable," she says. "My sexuality is totally fluid. I'm all over the fucking map – and I think I was then. But I also really wanted to be normal and hot, so I was like, 'Cool. I'm going to do everything I can to try and fucking figure out how to look like a girl and get these guys to like me.' That's it. It's totally a normal story." Except that it didn't play out normally because by then she was well on her way to filming movies like *Into the Wild* and *Adventureland* and – as part of her actual *Twilight* audition, believe it or not – rolling around with Pattinson on director Catherine Hardwicke's own bed.

Which means that while Stewart was still figuring out who she was and what being "fuckable" meant to her, the world was busy schooling her on both fronts. She couldn't leave the house without the male gaze following her in the form of TMZ photographers, couldn't arrange her face without becoming the cultural signifier of every single woman who's ever been told, "You're so much prettier when you smile." Plus, it was the noughties ("The nineties and the early 2000s were really horrific for young women. Don't you feel that way?"). Her anxiety got so bad that she'd lie on bathroom floors, unable to unclench her fists – *so* bad, at one point she had to be hospitalised ("They were like, 'She's dehydrated.' I was like, 'I'm not dehydrated. I'm fucking flipping out.' They gave me an IV and a mild sedative, and I started calming down and my hands started opening up, because you fucking atrophy").

BIKE
MEDIUM

There was a span of years when she couldn't enter a room without scoping out the exits, when she needed to know where a bathroom was at all times ("I was always like, 'Who knows? I could spontaneously combust in a puddle of puke right now'"). There was that period when she couldn't sleep, and then got addicted to not sleeping, thought she might die from not sleeping, but then, somehow, didn't. "I loved to be sad and shit," she tells me. "Oh my God. I made a complete art project out of it: my whole life."

Of course, all of that was a long time ago. Stewart wanders over to the fridge and gets us another round. Here's the thing: she's grown up. That's not who she is now. But also, in a way, it kind of is. As a queer woman in the public eye, she's had occasion to think about identity, and what it all means. She's considered the arc of things. "And it goes: Jodie [Foster], me, boygenius," she says, plainly, of the spots she imagines they all hold on the queer-celebrity continuum. "I'm in the middle. Do you know what I mean? Jodie had such a hard time [as a gay actor], and I'm not speaking for her – I am objectively analysing the time and place in which she was being her, and that is not easy – I would say fucking near-impossible if you wanted to continue doing what you love.

"For me, it wasn't a problem," she continues. "But that's probably because of the sort of space that I inhabit and the parts that I'm attracted to and the filmmakers that are attracted to me and the audience that exists for those movies. Had I really wanted to carve out more commercial space and maintain that, I don't know if that would've worked."

Still, she points out that, for her, coming out was not a painstaking process. She was "very physically out with my body" long before she publicly came out on *SNL*. And even that was a "very shoot-from-the-hip moment", she says. "It did not feel like this bloodletting." Nor was it something she'd planned in advance. She was merely sitting with the *SNL* writers, going, "This is the most boring monologue ever. What are we going to do? What the fuck?" when someone brought up Trump's tweets about her. "He's mad at me for cheating on my boyfriend?" she'd retorted. "Little does he know..." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew she'd use them. (As for her thoughts on Trump? "Of course he had to weigh in on my tarring and feathering. It's like, 'What is this 20-year-old who has no idea about life doing to this *man*?'" And: "He's such a little baby." And also: "Fuck you, bitch!").

She says that Foster has been a mentor to her – a number she will keep in her phone always, even if they aren't consistently in touch – and she's aware that her own openness about her queerness has likely been a model for others. But she also knows how much the needle has kept moving, at least in the "specialised little nook" of the world where she resides. She directed boygenius's *The Film* – a 14-minute music video that culminates in the three musicians making out with one another – and she can see the evolution from herself to them, how she has an awareness of gender-conformity that feels very "millennial" compared with what's on offer now. "I look at these kiddos that are so chilling on all of those fronts, and can have [gender] be like an accessory, can actually play with the novelty of that – have [femininity] one day, not have it the next." It's a psychological fluidity Stewart covets: "I'm so aware of these things."

And so she did what she could: she leaned into that awareness. She began reading mainly female writers ("I was really obsessed with male writers. I've only recently been like, 'What the fuck are they doing?'"). She began boning up on gender theory, giving herself the college education that, in another life, she might have had. She began thinking of female bodies not just physically and sexually, but also metaphorically ("The coolest fucking part of us is that we have this ever-present and unclosable opening, and we're walking around with it all the time, and we sort of pretend like it's not there, but it's our greatest strength"). She began to interrogate the "violence of the dynamic" when it comes to gender, whether someone has had a #MeToo moment or not (she says that she hasn't). "The violence and the shame that women internalise and then use as triggers for pleasure? We can't get away from it," she says. "To think that we know what we want in a way that's remotely divorced from the patriarchy is impossible. We will never. And I'm so much more interested in leaning into that versus away." In other words, she began, as she puts it, "*Vagina Monologue*-ing all over the place."

"I loved to be sad and shit. Oh my God. I made a complete art project out of it: my whole life"

Some years back, Stewart read a memoir that seemed to magically spew onto the page all that was cohering in her mind. Before she'd even finished *The Chronology of Water*, she emailed its author, Lidia Yuknavitch, asking if she could adapt her story, a cult favourite about female shame and female rage and female art and female-on-female BDSM and a bunch of other things "so taboo it's almost horny". It took Stewart years to complete the screenplay, which she refers to as a "living document". For several weeks while she was working on it, she camped in a van outside Yuknavitch's Pacific Northwest home. Then she read the script to Yuknavitch, out loud, in the writer's living room. Then she cast Imogen Poots to play Yuknavitch. Then she went looking for money to make the actual movie, which proved to be damn near impossible because, as it turns out, female shame and female rage and female art and female-on-female BDSM are topics that are not seen to lend themselves to box-office gold. Which only underscored how *every single fucking thing in the book was true*.

We'd been having a fairly chill time up until this point, but suddenly Stewart is standing up, pacing back and forth in front of the bookshelf. She knows her screenplay is "radical in a million ways". She knows she's never directed *The Tree of Life*. But she also knows the misogyny embedded in the system and that she could make something subversive and beautiful and true if only she were given the chance. "And it makes me fucking angry. And not in a way that's like, 'I've been doing this for so long, and so therefore I deserve it.' It's really more like, 'If I were a man, you would *fucking believe me*!'"

Stewart's voice has risen to the point that she is screaming now, over there by the books. Eventually, she strides to the pool table and begins racking the balls.

"Do you want to play a game of pool?" she asks. "It's the party trick of any fledgling lesbian." It may be worth mentioning that we are not entirely sober at this point. Outside the window, it's too dark to tell if it's still raining.

Stewart chalks a cue and then leans over the table and breaks. It's soon clear that she's the better player: when she sinks a ball, it's swift and decisive. Still, she's distracted by the conversation. Have I read any Jeanette Winterson? Or Kate Zambreno? What about Genesis P-Orridge's memoir? That's an extreme experience! Do I realise that we are setting ourselves up for failure here, with this whole cover-story thing? That it's impossible to pin down any moment in time, any fixed identity? Still, she wants the cover image to send a clear message: hyper-sexualised, left of andro, and flipping the gender script. "If I got through the entire *Twilight* series without ever doing a ROLLING STONE US cover, it's because the boys were the sex symbols," she points out. "Now, I want to do the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life. If I could grow a little moustache, if I could grow a fucking happy trail and unbutton my pants, I would. Guys – I'm sorry – but their fucking pubes are shoved in my face constantly, and I'm like, '*Ummmm,* bring it in.'"

Apropos to that, she won't give up on *Chronology*, she wants me to know. She's been talking about it with journalists for years – to the point that it's getting embarrassing – but it's now her only plan for the future. She'll keep writing things with Meyer, keep looking for other stories they could tell that she feels aren't being told, but she's not taking other parts; the next movie she films she wants to be her own.

I make a bank shot, and she looks at me with mock horror: "Now get the fuck out of my house."

CLOTHING: SECOND SPREAD: VEST BY YENA CAVA, JOCKSTRAP BY BIKE ATHLETICS; THIRD SPREAD: SHIRT IS SUBJECT'S OWN, JEANS BY LEVI'S; FOURTH SPREAD: VINTAGE NIKE SHIRT FROM STRAN STARS BEST, UNDERWEAR BY COU COU; PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACKET BY VINTAGE WINLIT, SHIRT IS SUBJECT'S OWN; THIS SPREAD: SHIRT, FABRICATED FOR SHOOT, SHORTS AND SOCKS BY LA APPAREL; FOLLOWING SPREAD: SHIRT BY VINTAGE ON HOLLYWOOD

EAT ME

ANIMAL

BY THE TIME we plonk ourselves back down in her living room a few weeks later, Stewart seems more relaxed, and not just from the endorphins released by her millions of chin-ups. About a week before our first meeting, she'd travelled to Latvia to location-scout for *Chronology*, and had been astounded by the beauty and diversity of the landscape – beaches that looked like Florida just a few miles from forests that looked like the Pacific Northwest. She'd now calculated that the movie could be shot there for a fraction of the cost, and though it was weird for her to consider making a movie outside of the Hollywood system, she was coming around to the idea. With these set pieces, she felt she could keep the project small and intimate, could suspend that fragile bubble of make-believe. "I don't want 80 people on set," she says. "If I see a truck, I'll lose my fucking mind."

Over the years, Stewart's most intimate relationships have tended to be with people she views as creative partners, which, she admits, has "not been great for having relationships". When it comes to Meyer, she says, "we don't have that separation. I found the right person because I can be so obsessive about what I do. And luckily my girlfriend, my partner, we are into the same shit. We have taken the things that we're spending our time on and interlocked them, and we're so much fucking smarter and stronger together. And you're just like, 'Fuck, that is the best.'"

The two met on the set of *American Ultra*, connected immediately ("in a way where you aren't sure if you want to fuck or be like, 'Dude, let's think of a handshake'"), and then unconnected immediately because of other romantic entanglements ("We were both so wrapped up in fucking other things, literally"). Six years later, they ran into each other again. Stewart asked why they hadn't stayed in touch. Meyer said she'd emailed. Stewart scoffed and then – oops – pulled up all the messages she'd ghosted. "It was my fault, for sure," she says. "But then I very much made this [relationship] happen. I was intense, because I was just positive."

Which, she found, was an interesting place to be. For so much of her adulthood, Stewart had felt unsettled. Years had been spent "really white-knuckling life and getting off on the highs and lows of things" and running headlong into "fucking horrific relationships" and leaning into experiences that were "emotionally psychotropic" because you can then "put so much into your art". And art had come out of it, art she'd sometimes even been proud of, art where she's been able to "deposit desire in people" and make her feelings their feelings – and, honestly, what's fucking better than that? "There was never a moment where I was like, 'Man, what am I doing with the time that I have on this Earth?'" she says. "I don't know what the fuck else I'd be doing. I love it."

And, look, it has been great to experience all these facets of herself, great to try them on and then figure out how she wanted to cast herself in her real life, which – let's be honest – is what we all do, all the time: "We make choices every fucking day about who we're going to be. Not in a controlling way, but just in a way that acknowledges, 'This is who I am. It's the easiest one. It's the one that's the most comfortable. It's the one I've chosen.'"

But also – and bear with her here; she knows she's about to contradict herself – she's aware that there can be something fundamental to who we are that can be lost and hard to retrieve. "I feel like I'm just getting back to that 11-year-old," she says. "It does take kind of a long period of growing up in order to get back to who you were when you were a little guy." She knows these things "might seem like a contradiction, like I'm presenting something that doesn't play well together." She balks at the concept of "authenticity" ("Are you fucking kidding me? We are all so malleable"). But she still feels like maybe there's something essential that you feel the loss of when it's denied, something that can help you grow into who you once were and stick that out, because "it's boring to not. It is unevolved to not. Now, I'm actually creating a home where I'm an adult and a person."

"Now, I want to do the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life"

A few years back, Stewart and Meyer moved into a house down the road, keeping this one to use as the offices of Nevermind and as a landing pad for friends going through breakups or other hard times, as Stewart was when she bought it (she refers to it as the "Heartbreak Hotel", adding that it's otherwise "crazy to have a secondary mansion down the street from your house"). Since Meyer proposed in 2021, they've thrown around ideas of how they want to get married, once joking (or half-joking? Or not joking?) that they wanted Guy Fieri to officiate. Since then, they've realised that their main focus needs to be their two passion projects – Stewart's *Chronology* and Meyer's *The Wrong Girls*, in which Stewart will star and which she describes as "a stoner buddy comedy about two slacker girls coming of age". It's the one movie that Stewart says that she would do if it got greenlit before *Chronology*. With all that percolating, Stewart explains, "we don't have it in us to have a big wedding. We're probably just going to do it soon. We just are busy trying to make movies because they're our babies."

Then again, they've been talking about the possibility of actual babies. "I don't know what my family's going to look like, but there's no fucking way that I don't start acquiring kids," Stewart told me during our first meeting. "And also, ideally at some point soon I go, 'I want to have a kid.' I really want that to happen." Having watched that desire solidify in so many of their friends, she and Meyer have started making preparations for how they might go about getting pregnant, and have discussed carrying each other's embryos. "I'm not scared of being pregnant. I'm not scared of having a kid," Stewart tells me. "But I'm so fucking scared of childbirth, it's crazy. Have you ever been too on drugs where you've suddenly needed to be on your hands and knees?" she asks of that sensation of your body operating outside your control. "I hate that. I mean, I smoke a lot of weed – I obviously self-medicate – but I don't like hard drugs. And I've tried – a lot. I just can't deal." Still, the thought of carrying a pregnancy is so "radical" that she'd like to think she could be up for facing that fear.

Right now, though, she can't wrap her head around creating anything – or anyone – before *Chronology*. She hopes that by March she's in Latvia shooting – she'd love to get there in time to capture some scenes of snow. She shows me the locations deck she put together, then asks if I want to see the sizzle, then spends several minutes fumbling with a remote control ("You know when you're too fucked up and you're trying to get music to play? This is like that"). Finally, she gets the video going, the plot approximated in pastiche, the tone strange and dark and exuberant. *This* is who she is, is what she's trying to say; she just wants to be able to say it. Less talk, more rock.

So I turn my tape recorder off. We swill some more Coors. The Los Feliz skyline darkens. Eventually, Meyer texts to see what's up, and we head to a dive bar a few minutes down the road where we sit at a booth and eat chicken wings and where not a single person approaches the table except the woman who takes our order. Stewart sits close to Meyer, who does most of the talking (about books, about writing, about how these are the best wings in Los Angeles to such an extent that "I'm not interested in other wings anymore"). Periodically, Stewart reaches out to gently touch Meyer's neck. At one point, they go outside to split the joint that's been hanging out behind Stewart's ear and return smiling and chummy. When the wings are done and the beers are finished, I call a car, and they wait outside with me until it arrives. They give good hugs, both of them.

Before we part ways for the final time, Stewart asks me again if I know what I'll write about her, which of course I don't. She's right: we've set ourselves up for failure with this whole cover-story thing. Identity is so fucking malleable, a series of choices made over and over again in service to something elusive. It can take so much strength to drown out all the noise and get to the point where you know how to make those choices in a way that feels true. So, yeah, I guess what I have to say is this: Kristen Stewart is strong as fuck – whatever the fuck that means.

PRODUCED BY RHIANNA RULE FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS; PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES; STYLING BY OLGA MILL FOR CAA; HAIR BY ADIR ABERGEL FOR A-FRAME USING VIRTUE LABS; MAKEUP BY JILLIAN DEMPSEY FOR WALTER SCHUPFER MANAGEMENT USING JILLIAN DEMPSEY; NAILS BY ASHLIE JOHNSON FOR THE WALL GROUP; TAILORING BY LYDIA JAKUBOWSKI; SET DESIGN BY ALEX CONSTABLE AND CJ KEOSSAIAN FOR MAXIM JEZER DESIGN; POSTPRODUCTION BY TWO THREE TWO STUDIO; PRODUCTION MANAGER: XAVIER HAMEL FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS; MODELS: GEORGIA STARNES, RHYS ATHAYDE AND KANOR EBEHEAKEY FOR O MODELS AGENCY; PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: JACK CLARKE AND DOUG STUCKEY; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ALYSSA LESSER; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY ARIEL SADOK, JACK BUSTER AND ALEXIS SOTOMAYER; DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: MIKE PREMAN; HAIRSTYLING ASSISTANCE BY SELINA BOON; LOCATION: ESTLR ATHLETICS

WARPED REALITY

With 2022's spine-tingling debut *Unlearning*, Glasgow glam-pop collective Walt Disco marked themselves out as one of the most intriguing outfits on the UK's alternative scene. On brilliant follow-up *The Warping*, however, they're shapeshifting boldly into the band they were always meant to be...

BY SAM LAW

THERE IS NO such thing as standing still. Not really. Walt Disco understand this better than most.

Breaking out on the eve of COVID, the Glaswegian collective could have been caught in the suffocating stasis of lockdown. Instead, they plotted a way forward, pouring empty, uncertain months into striking debut LP *Unlearning*.

Rather than building conservatively close to home as life opened up again, they harnessed that record's momentum to get out and see the world. And as technical difficulties threaten to derail their homecoming at McChuills Bar when we meet on a balmy Wednesday at the tail end of Scottish summer, they just sit back and smile, quietly assured that it'll take more than dodgy speakers to stop tonight's sweaty soft launch for superb second album *The Warping*.

"It's a record about change," smiles 'matriarch' and vocalist Jocelyn Si, surrounded by bandmates Finlay McCarthy (synths), Lewis Carmichael (guitar), Charlie Lock (bass) and Jack Martin (drums) in the calm before the storm. "It's about reacting to change, being afraid of change, wanting things to change. *Unlearning* could be seen as an album about unlearning habits and how we think about things in our lives. *The Warping* is about changing how we deal with those things moving forward."

At the forefront of that conversation is personal change. Compared to *Unlearning*'s disentanglement from societal norms and the outside world, *The Warping* is inherently more introverted. The title track, for instance, is a powerful exploration of gender dysphoria and envy, which finds Si pondering and processing the emotions and insecurities that come with being trans, ultimately finding catharsis in radical honesty. Dig deeper, though, and there are profound ruminations on separation too; the distance that can open up when the changes you go through detach you from life events like the death of a family pet or the sale of a childhood home. The nursery-rhymed inflections of 'Black Chocolate' tap into an almost-childlike appreciation of the security of family, while 'I Will Travel' finds that same constant grounding in a parent's dog.

"It's definitely a reaction to our experience of life in a band," continues co-songwriter Martin. On album one, being locked down shielded them from the harsher realities of life on tour, which only made them hit harder this time. "I see the members of this band far more than I see my friends or family. A lot of material here comes through the lens of realisation that just because we're away doesn't mean that things stay the same at home. They don't wait for us to get back. Life goes on."

McCarthy shrugs. "I guess that's just the price you pay to do all these amazing things that we've done. It's a form of therapy to talk about that bittersweetness, but ultimately we're grateful to be here."

Indeed, Walt Disco have plenty to be grateful for. With *Unlearning* nominated for the Scottish Album of the Year Award and Best Independent Album at the AIM Awards, as well as their high-profile support slots with acts like Simple Minds, Duran Duran and Primal Scream, plus appearances at Glastonbury, Latitude and SXSW in the US, Walt Disco have built a global following. Hollywood superstar and cult queer icon Tilda Swinton called them her new favourite band. And as this feature goes to press, they'll be on a continent-spanning European jaunt with English electronic icons Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (OMD).

While *Unlearning* was written and recorded in the claustrophobia of their own homes and driven by the mainly electronic DIY tools at their disposal, *The Warping* is the result of transatlantic sessions from Los Angeles and Austin to London and Glasgow. Lead single 'Pearl', for instance – a bleak portrait of an imagined future where Martin is living alone with regret on Glasgow's south side – is named after the Pearl Street Co-Op in Austin where they first toyed with its composition on a grand piano and

features a voice-note from when they returned to that very spot. Real recording, meanwhile, included sessions at Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera's studios in Surrey, with the majority taking place at The Vale in west London with co-producer Chris McCrory and engineer Chris D'Adda. Recorded almost entirely in analogue, the album draws on a whole new dimension of sound with horns, woodwind and strings.

"Does it make for a more atmospherically dense piece of music?" Si muses. "I think so. We have a lot more space to build out the size of the songs and add in those orchestral elements."

"As you get older, you get a bit more profound," says Martin, picking up the thread, while his bandmates name influences like Scott Walker, Sonic Youth, Sufjan Stevens and Kate Bush, as well as Grangemouth icons Cocteau Twins, Glasgow electro trailblazers The Blue Nile and Dundee post-punks The Associates. "You're not as lost in your feelings and fears. You're more objective about what you're trying to achieve."

"Plus," Si adds, "it was interesting writing pop-oriented music when none of us were in love."

"There wasn't a lot of vague love language," Martin agrees. "Fewer placeholder lyrics, too. There's still love in there, but it has a different feel when it's about love for friends, family, pets or even just the way that things are – to counterpoint the fear that they won't always be – rather than being about being 'in love'. It makes it more broadly human than any intense, specific romantic feelings."

From the breathy delivery, widdly synths and rump-a-pump melodrama of opener 'Gnomes' via the faintly funk-infused attitude of 'You Make Me Feel So Dumb' and the skeletal vulnerability of Si to the widescreen experimentalism of grandstanding closer 'Before the Walls', the execution is bold and breathtaking, combining the intimacy of the album's themes with the grandeur of an act ready to take over the world. Every experience they've enjoyed or endured over the past few years, right up to playing a crowd of 3,000 at Portugal's Extramuralhas Goth Festival a few days before we convene, and tonight's whites-of-their eyes homecoming has clarified the band they want to be.

"We're not Broadway," Si laughs. "We're not even famous, but we talk as if we are dealing with the struggles of being a famous Broadway act. We're haggard and showbiz, basically."

"And we're not afraid to have fun," nods Martin. "We get serious on tracks like 'The Captain' – touching on topics like global warming and toxic masculinity – but we turned it into an OTT Celtic sea song!"

"Why did we rhyme *'cantankerous'* with *'can't anchor us'*?" Si teases. "Because it's fun!"

They're ready to be figureheads, too, not just for the queer community they've always stood for – compared to solo artists, there is scant representation among British bands – but for all young creatives hoping to push the boundaries and defy expectations through truly original art.

"We're outcasts," Martin concludes. "We make music for anyone open-minded. And plenty of people who are open-minded just haven't had an experience where they can really embrace it yet. Maybe it would be easier for us if we were more 'normal' or stuck to one style, but our heroes – Bowie, Queen – all transcended genre to one degree or another, and it feels like we have to do the same!"

"We're not here to make music for the middle-of-the-road," McCarthy signs off with a wide smile. "We want people to be fully won over or totally disgusted. We're not interested in the in-between!" RS

> "We want people to be won over or disgusted"

Anitta's Funk Revolution

After a major health scare, the Brazilian star learnt to let go and got back to her roots

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUCAS BORI

Anitta at her home in Brazil in December

LAST NOVEMBER, JUST before the Latin Grammys in Seville, Spain, a crowd huddled in front of a club called Sala Cosmos, where the Brazilian superstar Anitta was co-hosting a massive party with Instagram. It got *too* massive: the venue was at full capacity, but that didn't stop people from shoving towards the door, eager to get in. Some of them spilled onto the pavement, dancing to the muffled, breakneck Brazilian funk beats echoing from the DJ booth.

Inside, Anitta was the life of the party, ass up and twerking on the dance floor in a highlighter-bright green-and-yellow dress. Stars like hip-hop legend DJ Premier and the Colombian pop band Morat milled about, while Anitta's dancers, nearly all of them Brazilian, backed her up. The DJ spun track after track, each moment a showcase of propulsive, hyper-energetic Brazilian funk, mirroring the parties in Rio where this voltaic blend of hip-hop, African rhythms and electronic music is played. These days, Brazilian funk (also known as funk carioca or baile funk) is bigger than ever, spawning TikTok dance challenges and full-on choreography. Anitta and her friends threw themselves into the moves – a particularly complex sequence involved push-ups. At one point, Ovy on the Drums, the producer known for making hits with Karol G, came up and told her that to keep up, "*uno tiene que ser atleta*" – "you have to be an athlete."

Late into the night, someone on Anitta's team told her she could go home if she wanted. "I was like, 'I'm already drunk! Why am I going to leave?'" She ended up being one of the last people standing, shutting down the club. "It was like 3am, and they were like, 'OK, they need to close the venue.' I was like, 'Where's the afterparty?'" she says. "I said, 'I'm only leaving when I'm kicked out,' and I got kicked out."

None of this is a big surprise: Anitta has built a brand as a bright, brazen human firework with a supremely dedicated global fan base. At 30, she's a trilingual triple threat, with chart-toppers in English, Spanish and Portuguese, and her splashy reggaeton and pop hits have helped earn her a Grammy nomination and even a Guinness World Record. "I'm sorry for others, but I think I'm the person who knows *the most*

how to do a party," she jokes the next morning, a mischievous smirk on her face.

As she says this, she's sitting in the lobby of her hotel in Seville. You can't tell she's been up all night: she's wearing a white crop top and a crisp black skirt, her red hair in neat, casual waves. Because Spain is hosting the Latin Grammys, the week has been packed with flamenco showcases and Spanish performances, which makes Anitta's event seem even more bold: only she'd have the guts to throw a gigantic baile-funk bash in the middle of everything.

To her, it was an opportunity to demand attention for Brazil, a country that's frequently and unfairly overlooked in the Latin-music industry because of the differences in language and culture. "This party and things like that help people understand my environment," she says. And it's part of a much bigger plan. Later this year, Anitta will release a Brazilian-funk album she hopes will bring more people to the music that brought her up. "I was born and raised in the communities of Brazil, of Rio, and these are the places that Brazilian funk originally comes from," she explains. "This was always my reality."

The music made her a breakout star in Brazil. Anitta, whose real name is Larissa de Macedo Machado, comes from Honório Gurgel, a working-class neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro. In 2010, she teamed up with funk-carioca producer Batutinha and signed to a funk label called Furacão. By then, Brazilian funk was already an underground sensation, a result of DJs throwing huge parties that drew from funk and hip-hop in primarily Black favelas during the 70s and 80s. Later, in the 90s, DJs began incorporating freestyle records flown in from Miami, amping the music with offbeat electronic influences.

Brazilian-funk DJ Rodrigo Gorky, who worked on Anitta's upcoming album, says that he used to refer to the music as "Miami bass on steroids". "Now, it's a complete thing of its own," he says. The genre has shot off into all directions, from tech house to Afrofuturism. Anitta played a special role in its growth, adding a more commercial, pop-focused twist throughout her career. But while she's never abandoned Brazilian sounds, she'd been busy scoring hits in other genres.

Then, last summer, she dropped the EP *Funk Generation: A Favela Story,* along with videos that capture life in Rio. It was the first sign that she was turning back to her roots in a profound way, and there are deeply personal reasons for that: Anitta's been through a lot over the past couple of years, including a cancer scare in 2022. "I was thinking I was going to die," she says. "And I said, 'You know what? I'm going to do an album for myself in case it's the last thing I do – not worrying about what's going to happen after the album, not worrying about if the album is going to be good, if people are going to like it, if it's going to be on the charts.'" Over the next year, Anitta overhauled her management and label teams, moves that positioned her to pursue the album.

She knows that making a Brazilian-funk album – especially when people are used to hearing her work in more mainstream genres – isn't an easy task. Brazilian funk has continued to grow in the pop world, attracting interest from stars like Rauw Alejandro and Cardi B. But it hasn't got its due at a global level. Gorky says if anyone can make it an international phenomenon, it's Anitta. "There's no one better than her to represent all this," he says.

"To be the pioneers is very hard because you're doing something nobody has done, so you don't have an example to follow," she explains. "You need to trust your gut, your feelings, and your intuition."

ANITTA STARTED THINKING about the new album when she was in the hospital. She says that in 2022, she had major autoimmune issues

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY KRISNA; STYLING BY DANIEL UEDA; SWIMSUIT BY AMIR SLAMA; HAIR AND MAKEUP ASSISTANT: FELIPE CARMO; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY GUILHERME HIGASHIZIMA, HUGO MACHADO, AND HENRIQUE SCA; PHOTO ASSISTANCE BY GUTO BROWN; RETOUCHING BY JUNIOR REIS

while suffering a series of misdiagnoses. (She had surgery for endometriosis that summer, and that December had to cancel a public appearance because she was admitted to a hospital in São Paulo.) At one point, the situation turned into a full-blown cancer scare. She went through tests and treatments for five months, somehow keeping it a secret from millions of fans who follow her every move.

At that time, everything seemed great in her career. Anitta approached the universe like she was game for anything. She was unafraid to talk about sex, plastic surgery ("My favourite one was my nose," she told Andy Cohen), and eventually politics. Fans pressured her to speak out against Brazil's former right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro when he was campaigning in 2018, and though Anitta wasn't very political – she's said she "started to have access to a good education after I got money" – she studied up. Soon, she was one of Bolsonaro's most outspoken critics.

By 2020, a Brazilian newspaper ranked her the third-most-influential political figure in the country, and when elections came in 2022, journalists wrote about how much sway her endorsement had. (Anitta supported current president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.) Meanwhile, her music was bigger than ever: 'Envolver', from her 2022 album, *Versions of Me*, made her the first solo Latin artist to reach number one on Spotify's Global chart. In 2022, she became the first Brazilian artist to win a VMA.

It felt like she was everywhere, constantly working, constantly creating, constantly weighing in. But she was exhausted. "In the beginning, when things were going unbelievably amazing and fast and crazy, it was because I was just having fun," she says. "At some point when things got huge, I started to care, with pressure and numbers and 'Oh, my God, keep my high-level profile!'" Her illness forced her to slow down and think about the never-ending grind her life had become. "It was hard for me to turn off the importance that I used to give to these opinions ... like, 'Oh, am I big enough now? I was big last year. This year, I'm not so big. Oh, I'm failing.'"

As she healed physically, she focused on her spiritual and mental well-being. "We can literally die tomorrow," she says. "All of these people saying, 'Oh, she's not hot anymore. Oh, she was hot last year'... They will completely forget about you. Your life is over, and their lives keep going. And you lived only to maintain yourself in these people's minds and thoughts, even though they don't actually care."

Major career changes followed. In March 2023, she vented on Twitter about wanting out of her contract with Warner Records. "If there was a fine to pay, I would have already auctioned off my organs, no matter how expensive it was, to get out," she tweeted. She blasted the label for using a photo of her with 'Envolver' playing in the background on International Women's Day, saying execs originally told her the song would "never break without a feat[ure] cuz I wasn't strong enough for that". "I already accepted the sad unfair fact that I'm the major investor here and asked the label to just do the simple job they were supposed to: promote my music," she wrote.

She says she spoke up because nothing else worked. "Nowadays, I think it was a little immature, but also it was a little desperate. I was desperate," she says. "It is what it is. Nowadays, being more mature, I would maybe do it differently. But maybe if I did differently, I wouldn't be where I am right now."

Warner and Anitta announced they were parting ways in April 2023. ("I really appreciate the way things ended," she says diplomatically.) A few weeks later, she signed with Universal's Republic Records – and then in June, news broke that she'd split from her longtime manager Brandon Silverstein. Anitta brought on Rebecca Leon, known for working with Rosalía, a change that marked a clean break in her career. Anitta has worked to keep it that way. She avoids drama; when people sent her a viral video of Silverstein screaming at someone on Zoom, she didn't comment. "This is not the type of thing that I'm trying to attract to my life," she says. "I was like, 'Guys, I don't want to be part of this conversation, to be honest.'"

Instead, she lasered in on the album, determined to make Brazilian funk right. "When I go to the studio, sometimes I hear people trying to do it, but it's still sounding very gringo," she says, laughing. Gorky remembers that she was hell-bent on getting unexpected sounds. "She's like, 'Nah, that's too commercial. That's way too pop, there's nothing new and exciting about this. Show me more.' And then we would start showing her really weird stuff, and she's like, 'That's what I'm looking for,'" he says.

> **"I was thinking I was going to die. And I said, 'You know what? I'm going to do an album for myself in case it's the last thing I do, not worrying about if it's going to be on the charts'"**

The final product reinforces the funk with touches of reggaeton and pop, and Anitta says it doesn't fit neatly into any category. "It's kind of like an artistic-alternative album," she explains. "It's not a mainstream of Latin because it's funk. It's not in the mainstream of the English world." She's let go of chart expectations. "When you're just trying to beat this person, beat that chart, beat that number, you don't have a purpose... And for me, it's way more. I want to open doors for my people."

Anitta spent the beginning of 2024 back in Rio, getting ready for Carnival in February and preparing the album release. When we catch up in January, she admits that things have been more hectic than she wants. "When the work comes back to being crazy, as I am right now in Brazil, then I just feel like, 'Oh, my God, I took a step back,'" she says. But she makes time for yoga and meditation every day, and goes on spiritual retreats every five months or so.

Her favourite thing to do when she's off is to binge movies. "I've seen everything that you can imagine," she says with a laugh. The night before, she went to the movies with her family to see *Mamonas Assassinas: O Filme*, a biopic about a Brazilian rock band that made it big in the early 90s before a plane crash killed all five members. Plane crashes seem to be a theme; she also watched *Society of the Snow* recently, followed by the 36-minute making-of doc on YouTube.

A lot still weighs on her. She's deeply concerned about how obsessed with the internet and social media some of her fans seem to be. It breeds the kind of culture of constant comparisons and rankings she's trying to move away from. There's an accessibility to Anitta; she says she tries to do frequent meet-and-greets to talk to fans directly. But she's honest about what so much pressure can do to stars. "I tell them, 'You cannot wish for me to be healthy and at the same time charge me with charts and number ones everywhere in the world, in Latin [America], in Brazil. A person can't be healthy and number one and happy at the same time,'" she says. "That comes back to this point of the internet, that people are not getting used to life being a cycle anymore. They want everything at the same time."

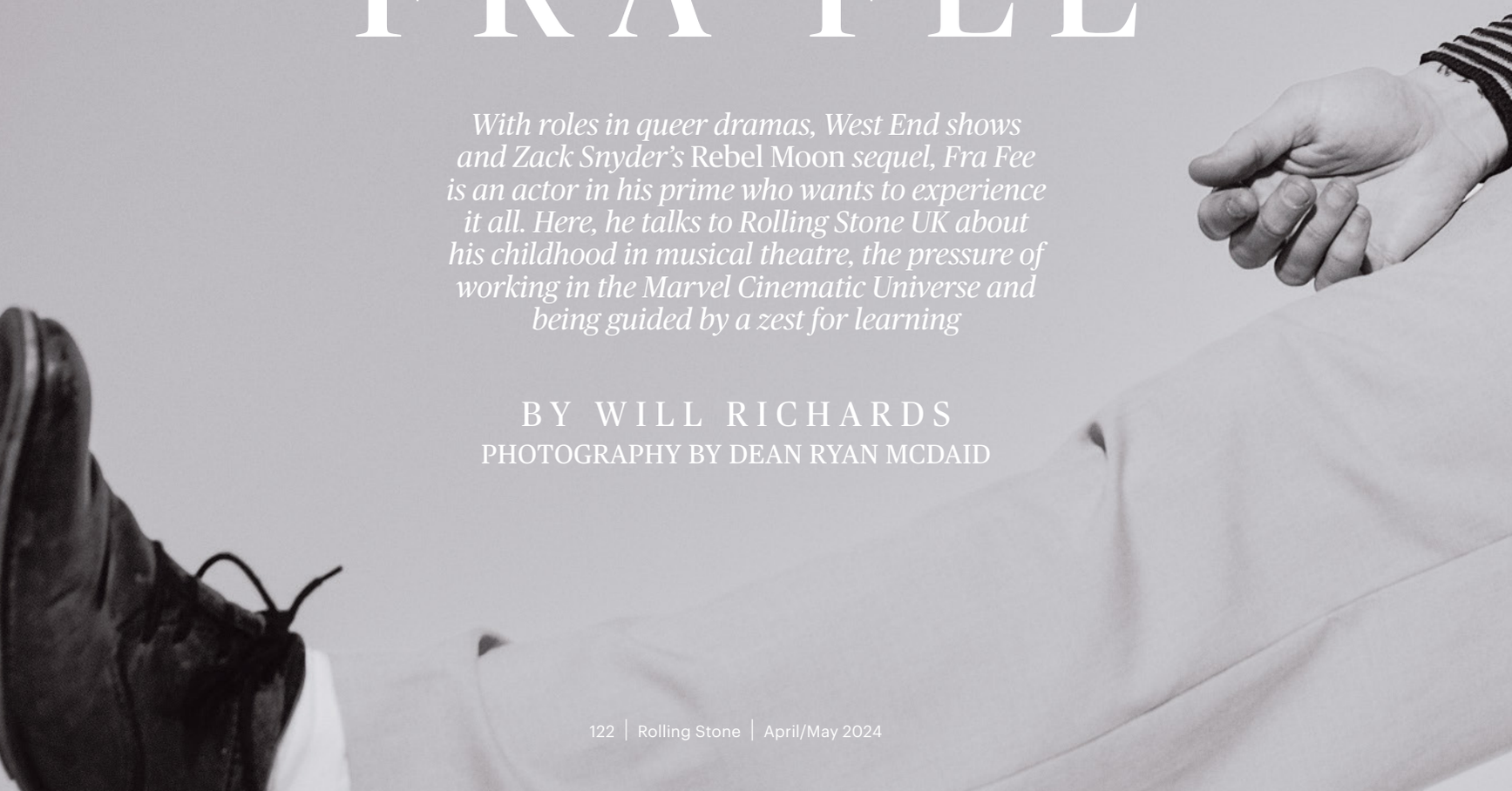
She's already influenced so much of public life in Brazil. Now, she hopes she can impart a few more lessons about letting go and staying present. "Let's just live life appreciating everything, not thinking, 'How am I going to get something from this?' Just doing things because you want to – that's the message I'm going to send with this album."

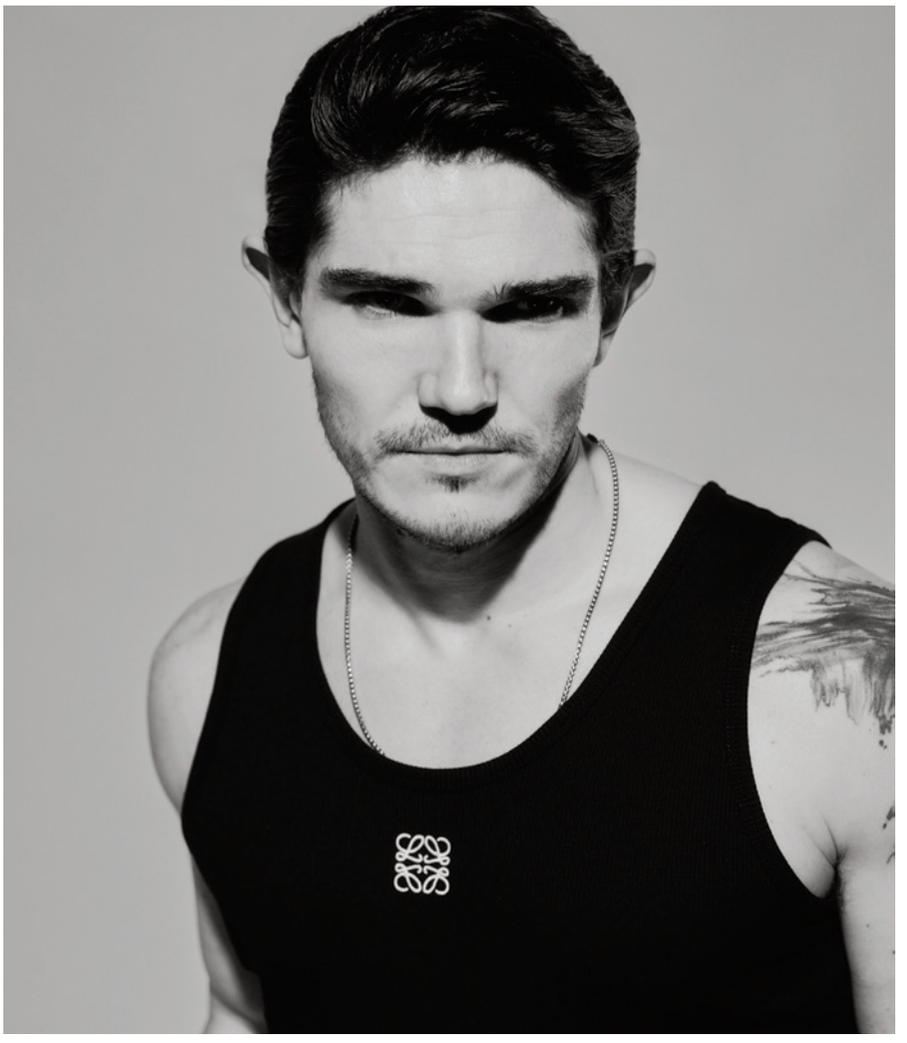
the CONTINUING EDUCATION *of* FRA FEE

With roles in queer dramas, West End shows and Zack Snyder's Rebel Moon *sequel, Fra Fee is an actor in his prime who wants to experience it all. Here, he talks to Rolling Stone UK about his childhood in musical theatre, the pressure of working in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and being guided by a zest for learning*

BY WILL RICHARDS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEAN RYAN MCDAID





FRA FEE IS at his happiest when he's learning. When we meet at an old haunt of his on south London's Bermondsey Street, he's preparing for the release of a big-budget Netflix space opera sequel while also rehearsing for a lead role in the Almeida's production of *King Lear*. Still, he becomes most animated when the prospect of something new comes up, namely when giving out book recommendations or receiving them from me. He has the air of a man hungrily hoovering up knowledge and art from every direction. "My aim is to get through the whole Man Booker shortlist each year," he smiles. "I've read some bangers this year!"

The voracity with which the Northern Irish actor consumes art in all its forms begins to explain why his career has seen him take on a wide range of roles across multiple disciplines, moods and formats. Across a 20-year career so far, Fee has been cast in shows in the West End, at theatres across Ireland and dipped his toe into the Marvel Cinematic Universe. What sets him apart, though, despite these diverging paths, is a refusal to be pigeon-holed into one type of role.

"It's about having the freedom to explore different things and different challenges, and I'm really, really happy to be able to do it," the affable 36-year-old says over coffee in between waxing lyrical about the next wave of Irish fiction writers. "When I started, I chose to do musical theatre initially because I really loved singing and it felt like a good merger of the things that I love and the talents that I have." After falling for "the proper stories that are really complex and require proper acting", moving onto both the big and small screen felt like a suitable and exciting step. "In this industry, it's very, very easy for people to be put into convenient boxes," he says, before adding that "everyone's multifaceted, and it's just storytelling at the end of the day."

Fee's story began when he played Kurt von Trapp in a school production of *The Sound of Music* at the age of 10 and was asked to submit a biography about his passions and aims. "What did they expect me to write?!" he laughs. "'Hi, I'm Fra, and I love fish and chips?!'" Instead, he shared his truth at the time: "When I grow up, I want to be an actor."

Fee credits the community theatre scene in Northern Ireland as being vital to his development at a young age. He grew up in Dungannon, a town in Co. Tyrone, where the theatre would pitch up with ample funding. This, the actor says, was an irreplaceable tool for young creatives when the central hub of Belfast "felt like a world away".

"The local amateur stuff is taken really seriously and done really well," he says, crediting the scene for both his ambition and the range of roles and moods he could inhabit from such a young age. "I remember the sets being extraordinary. For *The Sound of Music*, they had this actual waterfall for just the first song, and it was never used again! It was really, really impressive." Following in his son's footsteps is his father, Frank Fee, who is currently starring in a local production of *The Ferryman* with the Bardic Theatre Group. "They don't shy away from proper stuff," Fee says of the local scene's ethos. "That love for literature and drama is really encouraged and built into your DNA. It's a literary country."

Despite this, Fee says he "couldn't wait to get away" from Northern Ireland "for all sorts of obvious reasons." Speaking to *Attitude* in 2022, Fee – who is openly gay – recalled having to write an essay about why homosexuality was a sin while he attended an all-boys Catholic school. Those early experiences sparked a desire to relocate which saw him move to Manchester to study music at university, followed by a post-grad in musical theatre at the Royal Academy of Music. This led him straight to his first full role – in a production of *Dirty Dancing*. As he recounts with a laugh, his status as a limitless all-rounder was baked in from the start.

> *"In this industry, it's very, very easy for people to be put into convenient boxes. Everyone's multifaceted, and it's just storytelling at the end of the day"*

From there, he took on roles in *Les Misérables*, Sam Mendes' *The Ferryman* and *Romeo & Juliet*. He also took over from Eddie Redmayne as The Emcee in the West End adaptation of *Cabaret*. His big break on screen came with a part in Marvel TV show *Hawkeye*, in which he portrayed Kazimierz "Kazi" Kazimierczak. Next, he will take a prominent part in the sequel to Zack Snyder's Netflix space epic *Rebel Moon*. "Saying no has been really important for me," he explains of

keeping his profile as an actor fluid. "It's a really important part of the process if you want things to shift in some way."

IN PERSON, FEE is an affable conversationalist and keen storyteller. As we chat, he wistfully recalls living in Bermondsey's convenient but uniquely secluded pocket of central London during the pandemic, and how he'd bring whichever book he was devouring at the time into the cafe we're now sat in. After craving a quieter and more balanced lifestyle when away from the West End stage or Hollywood film sets, he now lives in rural Oxfordshire with his partner Declan Bennett.

With theatre work drying up during the pandemic, Fee – ever the learner – decided to use the downtime by undertaking Julia Cameron's famous 12-week programme The Artist's Way, to further hone his craft. One of the cornerstones of the programme is Morning Pages, an activity that asks you to write three pages of notes in a stream of consciousness as soon as you wake up each morning. The idea is to unclog the brain of conscious thought and leave more room for creativity. "I didn't manage it this morning!" he laughs, but it's become a routine that serves as "a form of prayer, meditation and gratitude" each day. "Whether it's spiritual or magical, it's like you're picking up your armoury in order to set out to do something."

In hindsight, Fee agrees he must have been "inadvertently manifesting" something for himself when he was unable to complete all 12 weeks of The Artist's Way after getting the call to star in *Hawkeye* alongside Jeremy Renner, Hailee Steinfeld and Florence Pugh. The Marvel debut opened a new chapter in the actor's career. "I was really keen to keep knocking on those big film and TV doors, and I was an MCU fan at that point," he says. "I know there's a lot of content there, but at that stage *Hawkeye* was one of the first of this next phase of TV shows in that universe. I never imagined myself being in them, I just imagined going to the cinema to see them."

A comic book fan in his youth, Fee is aware of audience expectations of how a character they are intimately familiar with should be portrayed on screen, something he has also had to contend with in his roles in *Les Mis*, *Romeo & Juliet* and now *King Lear*. Like everything with his outlook on his creative life though, he intends to transcend these expectations and bend the characters into new shapes. "There's not a pressure as such, because fundamentally you have to do what's on the script," he muses. "The fandom surrounding it is extraordinary, and you have to enjoy that side of it rather than feel pressure to meet some sort of expectation. You have to do what serves the story."

Back in big-budget blockbuster territory for *Rebel Moon*, Fee regales the film's "old school, big storytelling on such a wonderfully epic scale with this extraordinary cast of misfits and outsiders that are all trying to find a purpose". Fee plays the tyrant Balisarius, spending most of it in a big grey beard playing an older version of the character. "There's a whole wealth of mystery and background as to where he's come from, how he has found himself in this unbelievable position of power, and why he felt he deserves that escalation to higher influence.

"It was so cool, and something I felt everyone could get on board with," he adds. "In Part One, you're seeing your archetypal evil guy, but there's a person behind that mask... or in this case behind that fake beard. He's the elusive 'man behind the curtain' figure. People quiver when they hear his name, but he was a young person who grew up in a somewhat dispossessed society and fully believes he is entitled to and worthy of this position of power."

Cast in the role as a younger man, Fee largely plays the older version of himself, while the story explores his "rise to power" through flashbacks. This origin story is set to be expanded upon in the film's sequel – shot at the same time as the first film – which lands on Netflix in April. "There's a really, really wonderful story to be told," says Fee.

AFTER EXISTING WITHIN these parallel worlds of musical theatre and big-budget, glossy Hollywood productions, Fee is now set to stretch himself once again with a starring role in *Lost Boys and Fairies*, an upcoming queer BBC drama about a Cardiff-based gay couple's journey to adoption. It will be the first time that he will lead a production as a gay character. The semi-autobiographical story of writer Daf James sees Andy (Fee) and his partner Gabriel (Sion Daniel Young) adopt three children, with Gabriel aiming to repair his relationship with his father while also moving towards becoming one himself. "Whenever [James] got the chance to submit something for the BBC writers' room, he wanted to write about gay adoption, because it's what he knows, and thankfully it got greenlit," smiles Fee. "It's just unbelievably beautiful."

He continues, "[Having children is] something that particularly gay people have to really consider, because it's not going to happen accidentally. You're going to have to choose for it to happen, and it's a really big choice." Fee has thought about adoption himself, but "right now it's certainly not on the table." The role allowed him to "imaginatively" explore that outcome, and "go through all of the feelings that come with even thinking about inviting someone into your life that you have to be responsible for and nurture and love and guide through life. It was a really, really beautiful experience."

To prepare for the role, Fee sought the advice of a handful of his gay friends who have adopted children. "It's an incredible purpose to have in life, and such a selfless thing," he says of

> *"There's a reason I'm doing this on an intuitive level, to have the joy of trying on different costumes. By doing that, you discover realities that create empathy with your fellow man"*

STYLING BY SACHA DANCE; GROOMING BY SVEN BAYERBACH AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT

parenthood. "I'm definitely open to it, but it'll have to be a big surge inside of me to do it." The show's importance also stems from its celebratory nature. There's one small scene of the lead characters experiencing homophobia, otherwise it's "such a celebration" says Fee. "Their social worker loves them and puts them closer to the top of the list because they're two really decent fellows, and they're going to create a gorgeous home for whoever it is that's invited into their life. It's a very positive, happy representation because that's what happened! That's Daf's experience. He and his partner are very, very happy dads to these kids. It's wonderful."

Fee's latest role is also representative of a larger shift in his self-confidence and what he wants to bring to his acting. "When I was younger, I used to always want to play parts as far away from myself as possible," he reflects. "I hated acting in my own accent for a long, long time. Even when I was a kid and did youth opera, I adamantly refused to perform in my own accent. I couldn't hear my own accent without cringing. I'm not really sure what that was about as a 15- or 16-year-old!" he laughs. "It's actually really lovely to do something in your own voice and find these similar strands of character and actor."

The same principle can apply to Fee's queerness. While he doesn't want this to lead to him being typecast in exclusively gay roles, he does wants to explore this more on screen. "There is a preference for playing oneself when it comes to sexuality," he begins, "which of course I'm very happy to do, and there are certain instances when I feel you need an actor who has had the lived experience of that character, especially if that lived experience is a big part of the story.

> *"There is a preference for playing oneself when it comes to sexuality, and there are instances when you need an actor who has had that lived experience"*

"I wouldn't want to only play that side of myself, aside from the fact that it's only one significant but small-ish side to who I am," he adds. "It goes back to my 15-year-old self that refused to do my own accent. There's a reason why I'm doing this on an intuitive level, to have the joy and freedom of trying on different costumes and armour. It's playing outside of my lived experience, because by doing that you get to discover other realities that create empathy with your fellow man."

Bringing everything full circle, he smiles, before saying of the personal growth that comes with his craft: "It also helps you learn more. I'm curious about the different strands of potential that this job can provide," he says. "There's potential in reaching out and touching people in different ways. *Hawkeye* was the very first time that I'd done proper stunt fighting, and I realised I fucking loved it! I wasn't bad at it either. I began to believe that in another life I would've been a boxer. It's a real gift when a job can afford you the luxury of trying new things and finding new skills."

As his rich and varied career continues to take him in many new directions – next up is Apple TV+'s conspiracy thriller *Prime Target*, where he'll appear alongside *One Day* star Leo Woodall – the only prerequisite is that each role pushes him further towards understanding himself, others and the human condition. It's all about chasing a feeling he first had as a child. "One of my first seminal moments that sparked and ignited something in me was when I was very, very young," he says, leaning forwards in his chair for emphasis. His sister Claire was playing Mickey in a performance of *Blood Brothers* at her all-girls school, St Patrick's in Dungannon, and Fee and his mother were going to collect her after rehearsals.

"My ma sent me in to stand at the back to let her know we were outside, and they were finishing the rehearsal with 'Tell Me It's Not True'. I'd never seen anything on stage before, ever, and I was completely transfixed," he remembers, giving the same wide-eyed grin you can imagine the seven-year-old Fee had at the back of the school hall that day.

"I was hooked," he says of the lightning bolt moment, which still powers him forwards to this day and informs the core of what he wants to be as an actor and a performer. "It gave me the aspiration of looking for a job that would give me that exact same feeling that I had that day. I was transfixed by the magic of a story, of an imagination, and everything I do – even now – is me trying to continually pursue that."

SUMMER SESSIONS

Experience live music at its best with the Rolling Stone UK guide to this year's finest music festivals across the UK and Europe

LIVE AT LEEDS: IN THE PARK

25 MAY, TEMPLE NEWSAM PARK, LEEDS

After starting as a multi-venue indoor festival among the bustling streets of Leeds, 2022 saw Live at Leeds launch a new event — In The Park — which does exactly what it says on the tin. On May bank holiday weekend, the very best in indie will descend on Temple Newsam for an unmissable knees-up. Satisfying all of your nostalgic cravings, headliners include The Kooks and The Cribs, while Declan McKenna, Future Islands, Circa Waves and more are also on board. As well as living out all your indie dreams, there's also plenty of opportunity to find your new favourite band too — look out for the likes of Vistas, The Mysterines and Flowerovlove.

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
The Kooks, Declan McKenna, The Cribs

INSIDER TIP:
This is a perfect day out for families, and under-fives tickets can be added to your order for free when you buy your own.

BUY TICKETS:
liveatleedsinthepark.seetickets.com

WIDE AWAKE

25 MAY, BROCKWELL PARK, LONDON

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard, Slowdive, Young Fathers

INSIDER TIP:
The main stage at the 2024 event will be hosted by Seattle radio institution KEXP, who produce some of the best live sessions around.

BUY TICKETS:
kaboodle.com

After its first planned edition was cancelled due to COVID, Wide Awake has become the biggest post-pandemic success story on the London festival calendar. Defined by its wide range of styles and genres, this day festival is committed to spotlighting the weirder and more leftfield corners of rock and pop music. It's also leading the way in green technology, with its Positive Policy aiming to reduce the event's carbon emissions year-on-year. The team behind the festival also programme venues like MOTH Club and The Shacklewell Arms, and they do an unmatched job of bringing the same energy of these small, sweaty venues to the big stage. The bill will be topped by King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard, Slowdive, and Young Fathers: three bands who personify Wide Awake's ethos — that you can become a festival headliner by blazing your own uncompromising path and putting weirdness at the centre of your music.

Primavera Sound, 29 May–2 June Parc del Fòrum, Barcelona. After a few years of mixing up its formula – first a two-weekend festival, then a sister edition in Madrid – Primavera Sound returns to its spiritual home of Barcelona's Parc del Fòrum for a three-day event in 2024. This year's headliners include SZA, Vampire Weekend, Lana Del Rey, Pulp and Charli XCX, while — as always with Primavera — the undercard is bustling with forward-thinking DJs, leftfield pop stars and rock royalty to take you through till sunrise.

As much about the atmosphere as the line-up, Primavera Sound attracts a crowd from all over Europe and beyond, and is industry-leading in a number of ways, including being an early adopter of committing to a 50/50 gender split on its line-up.

ON THE MOUNT AT WASING

17–29 JUNE
THE MOUNT, WASING ESTATE, READING

While strictly a concert series, these outdoor gigs are set to have a magic and beauty that rivals any top festival. You'd expect nothing less from a show set deep in the Berkshire countryside, where an outdoor amphitheatre is surrounded by panoramic treescape vistas. It makes for the lushest of gig settings, while the acts — everything from Aussie legends Crowded House to dance-floor fillers Jungle — mean that every taste is catered for.

DOWNLOAD FESTIVAL

14–16 JUNE, DONINGTON PARK, LEICESTERSHIRE

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Queens of the Stone Age, Fall Out Boy, Avenged Sevenfold

INSIDER TIP:
Be sure to check out a band on one of the smaller stages. This spiritual home of rock has quite the reputation for hosting the stars of tomorrow, today.

BUY TICKETS:
downloadfestival.co.uk

Devil horns at the ready! The home of rock returns once more in 2024, fresh from winning the Festival Award at the inaugural Rolling Stone UK Awards, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, last year. This time around, the line-up reflects the sheer breadth of creativity existing within rock and heavy metal. Emo icons Fall Out Boy will make history with their first-ever Download headline set, while Busted — yes, you read that correctly — will be whipping up a healthy dose of nostalgia over on the Avalanche Stage. As ever, though, it's the powerful community feeling that *really* makes Download stand out — with music fans from all over the world uniting at this Vatican of rock music to worship at its riff-laden altar. All hail.

GLASTONBURY

26–30 JUNE, WORTHY FARM, SOMERSET

For five days, a dairy farm in the deep Somerset countryside transforms into the greatest show on Earth. Since its humble beginnings in 1970, Glastonbury has gone on to become a national institution and the best weekend of the year for many of its attendees. It's a place where the biggest names around share stages with upcomers, all hoping to deliver that special magic Worthy Farm has become so known for. With the site roughly the size of 500 football pitches, you're unlikely to see it all, so do plan your weekend carefully if you're heading down. The main stages are great, but it's the festival's south-east corner that truly comes alive after dark. A trip to Shangri-La and Block9, to name but two of Glastonbury's most celebrated nightlife areas, is likely to be among the wildest evenings you'll have all year.

Timber Festival 5–7 July, Feanedock, Moira, Swadlincote.

At one with nature? This could well be the festival for you. Timber is a weekend festival set in the lush National Forest where music lovers, outdoor adventures and wellness seekers come together to be restored by the natural world. That means a chance to chill out with a beer on the hill as the sun goes down, or even stepping into your dancing shoes and enjoying world-class DJs at the woodland Eyrie stage. It's the perfect choice for the environmentally conscious festivalgoer.

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Kiiōtō, Jason Singh, Frankie Archer, Dave Haslam, Rozi Plain

INSIDER TIP:
Take a moment for yourself and visit the woodland spa and yoga workshop.

BUY TICKETS:
timberfestival.org.uk

KAPPA FUTURFESTIVAL

5–7 JULY, PARCO DURA, TURIN, ITALY

For more than 10 years, Kappa FuturFestival has been an essential pilgrimage for dance lovers wanting to head to the continent, while also soaking up the delights of Turin. This year's edition — featuring a newly resurgent Skrillex at its very top — looks set to continue that reputation for another year. Bellissimo indeed...

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Skrillex, Jeff Mills, Bonobo, Honey Dijon, The Blessed Madonna

INSIDER TIP:
Last year saw the festival debut two new stages: The Voyager and The Kosmo. Be sure to check those out.

BUY TICKETS:
kappafuturfestival.it

MAD COOL

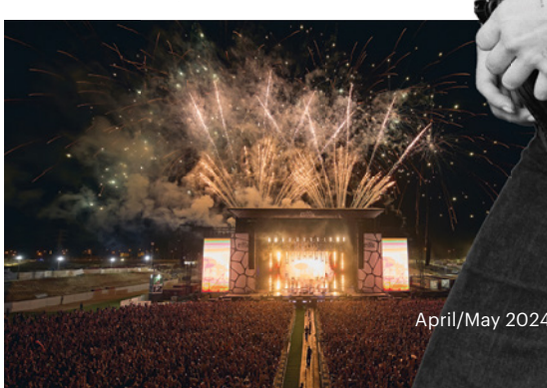
10–13 JULY, IBERDROLA MUSIC VENUE IN VILLAVERDE

Since its inception in 2016, Mad Cool has become a highlight of the European festival circuit, bringing international heavyweights and Spanish newcomers to Madrid for an all-night party. The festival moved to a new location in 2023, and will this year welcome Dua Lipa, Pearl Jam, Måneskin, The Killers and more in a world-beating line-up. Of the less well-known acts, we recommend Irish rap troupe Kneecap, chart-topping singer Kenya Grace, south London jazz stalwart Joel Culpepper and the woozy funk of Aussie star Jet Vesper.

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Dua Lipa, The Killers, Bring Me The Horizon

INSIDER TIP:
For a panoramic view of the site and the main stage, take a trip on the festival's ferris wheel.

BUY TICKETS:
madcoolfestival.es/tickets



NOS ALIVE

11–13 JULY, PASSEIO MARÍTIMO DE ALGÉS, LISBON, PORTUGAL

Since its inception in 2007, Nos Alive has honed a well-deserved reputation for being one of Portugal's top music events — attracting a heady mixture of music-loving locals and tourists seeking a glorious getaway at the sun-soaked coastal festival. This year's reliably brilliant line-up takes in icons from grunge and modern pop and everything in between. When the festival isn't on, Lisbon is one of Europe's top cities to explore by day.

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Pearl Jam, Dua Lipa, Arcade Fire

INSIDER TIP:
By day, head into Lisbon to experience the delights of one of Europe's most famed culinary capitals. Then go for a dip in the Atlantic Ocean. That'll go some way towards nursing the hangover...

BUY TICKETS:
nosalive.com/en/ticket-office

POSITIVUS FESTIVAL

19–20 JULY RIGA, LATVIA

The weather at UK festivals is notoriously unpredictable, so it's no real surprise that some festivalgoers are seeking sunnier climes with top line-ups. Positivus is firmly in that category. Summers in Riga are mild and sunny, and it's also one of Europe's most affordable cities to boot. Where better, then, to take in headline sets from pop giant Jason Derulo, Migos leader Offset and pop polymath Jacob Collier? See you in the sun.

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Jason Derulo, Offset, Nothing But Thieves, Benjamin Clementine, Jacob Collier, Will Butler & Sister Squares, Picture Parlour

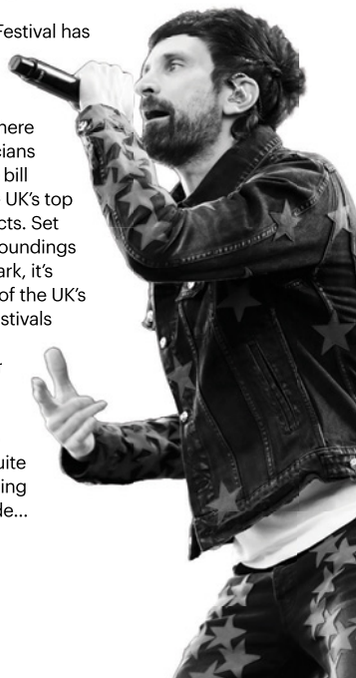
INSIDER TIP:
Riga is considered to be one of Europe's finest cultural gems — packed with an array of celebrated museums and concert halls. Culture vultures will lap it up.

BUY TICKETS:
positivusfestival.com/en

LATITUDE

25–28 JULY, HENHAM PARK, SUFFOLK

Since 2006, Latitude Festival has developed a rightful reputation for being one of the UK's leading arts events, where stadium-slaying musicians sit comfortably on the bill alongside some of the UK's top literary and comedy acts. Set against the idyllic surroundings of Suffolk's Henham Park, it's considered to be one of the UK's most family friendly festivals too. It's not every day that punk poet icon Dr John Cooper Clarke can share the same bill as Gen-Z pop hero Baby Queen, right? Quite simply, there's something for everyone at Latitude...



SZIGET

7–12 AUGUST ÓBUDA ISLAND, BUDAPEST

In the middle of the Danube River in Budapest is Óbuda Island, a 108-hectare strip of land that has played host to Sziget festival since its inception 31 years ago. Since then, the festival has grown from a showcase of local talent to a home for international superstars, while retaining its transgressive spirit. From Wednesday to Monday this August, the city is taken over by a line-up mixing pop and dance, with the likes of Four Tet, Fred again.. and Overmono rubbing shoulders with Becky Hill, Nia Archives, Yard Act and more.

CONFIRMED ARTISTS:
Sam Smith, Stormzy, Louis Tomlinson

INSIDER TIP:
With the festival running from Wednesday to Monday, it's the perfect event to base an entire summer holiday around.

BUY TICKETS:
szigetfestival.com/en/tickets/list

GREEN MAN

15–18 AUGUST BRECON BEACONS, WALES

In the Black Mountains of Wales each August, Green Man festival proves why it's become a shining star of the UK festival calendar. Musically, it presents folk, dance and electronic music, rock and beyond, but it's the festival's overall energy and community feel that sets it apart. Much like Glastonbury, thousands rock up to the festival each year regardless of who's on the line-up, with the music almost feeling coincidental to the overall experience of spending a weekend in the mountains. That doesn't mean they don't put on thoughtful and exceptional bills though; this year's headliners Big Thief, Sampha, Jon Hopkins and Sleaford Mods continue Green Man's championing of the cult stars of the independent scene.

ALL POINTS EAST

16–26 AUGUST VICTORIA PARK, EAST LONDON

For ten days, some of the world's most pioneering and boundary-pushing acts descend on east London for the mother of all parties. This year, things kick off with acclaimed producer/rapper Kaytranada, before the likes of Loyle Carner, LCD Soundsystem and many more make their mark on the APE stage. Field Day, meanwhile, is a glorious one-day celebration of dance/electronic music. The best part? It's just a stone's throw from Mile End station on the Central Line — which means that weary punters can be back home in no time after a grand day out.

READING & LEEDS

21–25 AUGUST, RICHFIELD AVENUE, READING; BRAMHAM PARK, LEEDS

The Reading & Leeds Festivals have ruled the August bank holiday weekend for decades, and are taking a big leap into the future in 2024. As well as laying on a stellar set of headliners — from Lana Del Rey and Fred again.. to Liam Gallagher, Blink-182 and beyond — they're launching new dance stage The Chevron and welcoming the return of the Radio 1 Stage. As a festival that defines many British music fans' teens, it highlights the prevalence of dance music in modern culture as Reading & Leeds shapeshift once again to remain at the centre of the zeitgeist.

End of the Road, 29 August–1 September Larmer Tree Gardens, Dorset. The traditional festival season closer, End of the Road takes over Dorset's idyllic Larmer Tree Gardens every year. Having built a fiercely loyal fanbase over the past decade, the festival welcomes rock bands, singer-songwriters, jazz musicians, pop stars and beyond with an ethos that prioritises boundary-pushing. This year, IDLES, Slowdive and Fever Ray top the bill, with other highlights including Lankum, Jockstrap and CMAT. With literature, poetry, silent discos and more, End of the Road is the perfect way to see out the summer.

FESTIVAL ESSENTIALS

EVERYTHING YOU NEED FOR A SUMMER OF LIVE GIGS — RAIN OR SHINE

Got the power

Content is king when it comes to music festivals, so a power-bank is a must when you've drained your smartphone battery taking hundreds of videos of your favourite artist that you will never watch again. Hama's quick-charge bank from Selfridges can charge three devices simultaneously, while also being small and light and therefore easy to carry. It's also perfect for charging smartwatches, digital cameras or Bluetooth headphones, so it will get plenty of use outside festival season too.
PD10 HD 10k Quick-charge powerbank, £39.99, by Hama at Selfridges, selfridges.com

Go green

Ray-Ban has created a sustainable twist on a classic style with its unisex Teru bio-based sunglasses. The bold frames are as green as their colour (other options include electric blue, lilac and black), created sustainably and come in a minimalist design so they will work well with any festival outfit.
Teru Bio-based sunglasses in algae green, £123, by Ray-Ban, ray-ban.com

Clever camp

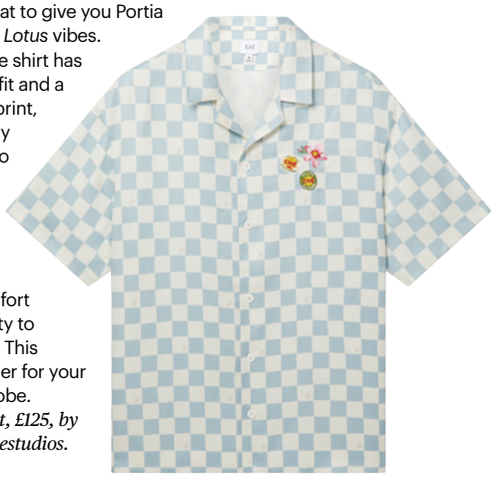
The North Face is a connoisseur of the cool but hardworking accessory. Its Base Camp Travel Washbag is water-repellent and comes with a handy hook for hanging up to utilise space — and to keep your toiletries dry if your tent gets flooded. A zip-top opening makes for easy access to your toiletries. Made from recycled fabric, the wash bags come in khaki, black or yellow, with the trademark logo.
Base Camp Travel Washbag (small) £28, by The North Face, thenorthface.co.uk

Picture perfect

Sony's award-winning RX100 VII camera boasts an unrivalled combo when it comes to recording your music memories. Compact, but packed with power, its 24-200mm zoom lens offers a broad range, plus there's real-time tracking and enhanced photo stabilisation for quality image-making even in tricky lighting. As well as stills, it has an external microphone jack and video capability.
Sony RX100 VII camera, from £1,049, by Sony, sony.com

Checkmate

This playful piece from CHÉ Studios will be a festival favourite. It's so versatile you could wear it with a vest top and shorts, or over a dress with a bucket hat to give you Portia from *The White Lotus* vibes. The Check Mate shirt has a vintage-style fit and a checkerboard print, with embroidery inspired by retro fruit stickers. Super soft, it's made from 100 per cent Tencel™ Lyocell for comfort and breathability to keep you fresh. This shirt's a headliner for your summer wardrobe.
Check Mate shirt, £125, by CHÉ Studios, chestudios.co.uk



Sac-magique

The magical cross-body bag from Uniqlo with its Tardis-like storage qualities is back in a new range of colourways. The semi-circular mini shoulder bag comes in paler hues for 2024, with cornflower blue (pictured), lavender, peach and daffodil yellow, as well as classic monochrome shades. Made famous by TikTok, the shoulder bag is an essential for any festival, owing to the fact you can just fit so damn much into it.
Round mini shoulder bag, £14.90, by Uniqlo, uniqlo.com

WORDS AND EDIT: JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Mini but mighty

Sometimes you don't want to be in the centre of the crowd crush at a festival, and a chilled-out campsite moment can offer much-needed respite. Marshall's Emberton II portable speaker ensures you can bring the music with you when you're away from the main stage. Its sleek look boasts all the familiar Marshall hallmarks, as well as Marshall's superior signature sound, 30-plus hours of portable playtime, and a durable design to withstand life outdoors. Available in three colours, including the new Black and Steel.
Emberton II, £149.99, by Marshall, marshallheadphones.com

Boot up

Mud is part and parcel of British summertime, so be sure to pack a pair of wellies. Crocs is keeping things compact and cute with its unisex classic boot, which comes in sunflower (pictured), army green, navy, atmosphere, black, and juice pink. Its all-weather boot is lightweight and waterproof and falls just below the calf, so it will keep you dry, while not overheating your feet if the sun comes out. You can also customise them in true Crocs fashion, with space to add their super fun Jibbitz™ — time to get whimsical with your wellies.
Yellow classic boots, £54.99, by Crocs, crocs.co.uk

Rebel rebel

Your arms will be stacked by the end of the summer, with various wristbands from everywhere from Leeds, Reading and Glastonbury to Barcelona and California. Elevate your arm candy with THOMAS SABO's unisex leather bracelets. Available in single or double bands, these braided leather accessories feature clasps made from recycled silver. Alongside simple styles, there are also bracelets with embellished and burnished sterling silver skulls, black cats, tigers, crosses or tree of life beads.
Leather bracelets, from £89, by THOMAS SABO, THOMASSABO.COM

Cowboy cat

Beyoncé, Lana and Kacey are all giving us country albums for the summer, so we're ready to dust off our Gaga Joanne hats and Kate Moss Indie-sleaze cowboy boots in celebration. There are plenty of ways to have fun with the cowboy trend, and the Everpress site offers plenty of great pieces by independent creators. This Rootin' Tootin' tee by Miranda K has got us purring, but if cowboy cats aren't your thing, Everpress has curated a superb collection of graphic and slogan tops that are full of fun and festival frivolity.
Rootin' Tootin' classic T-shirt, £28, by Miranda K, everpress.com

Inside the ring, injuries are common. “If no one dies, it’s not a corraleja,” fans say

Colombia's *corralejas* bull fights area bloody free-for-all where only the humans die

BY TOBY MUSE

'It's like I'm dancing with death'

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS PARRA RIOS

In the coliseum, the bull stares down hundreds of men. He’s a half-ton killer, black, head white like a skull, horns curled. Bred for the fight.

There’s violence in his DNA. The bull scans the crowd in the ring, alert to any challenge. The crowd watches for the animal’s slightest of movements. When the hundreds of men flee, they move in tandem, like a school of fish dodging a shark. The blazing tropical sun beats down on us all.

From the crowd steps a man. Catalino Bravo wears the face of a clown, white paint over his black skin, a nose daubed red. Something’s crazed in his eyes. An entirely sane man would not yell at an enraged 600-pound bull that stands 30 feet in front of him.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!”

The 25,000 or so spectators cheer Bravo. In the stands, one of the band’s drummers is lost in his solo. The drums beat faster and faster.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!”

The bull settles his gaze on Bravo and stomps the ground, shooting dust into the air. Bravo takes two steps forward, two steps back, revving his body. Rapt, the audience watches. The drums pound in a frenzy, and Bravo again shouts “Hey! Hey! Hey!”

The bull charges. The audience cheers, the audience screams. Quickly crossing himself, Bravo sprints – straight at those horns. Now everything happens faster than the brain can process. Why is this man running at the charging bull? How can he survive? What the fuck is going on?

The audience is on its feet, hollering. The drum solo keeps going, faster, madder. The man and the bull charge each other, erasing metres in a second.

At the last moment, when it seems inevitable that Bravo will be gored, everyone holds their breath. Inches from those murderous horns, Bravo launches himself into the air, soaring over the bull. The bull steamrolls forward, and Bravo lands in the dirt in a roll and jumps to his feet.

The crowd hollers, shaking the wooden pillars, threatening to bring down the entire coliseum. The “jump of death”, a trick that has cost men their lives, had been perfectly executed – this time. A second too early or too late, the bull could hook Bravo, ripping him open. Now, he runs around the ring, celebrating like a champion. From the stands, adoring spectators throw money down to him.

“This sport is for psychos,” Bravo says afterwards, his eyes still glowing from the adrenalin.

These are the *corralejas*, bullfighting Colombian-style. The corralejas mix San Fermín’s Running of the Bulls, where the brave, the drunk, and the dumb outrun marauding bulls, and Spain’s traditional bullfighting. But with important differences. Here the bulls don’t die. Only the men.

For more than a century along Colombia’s Caribbean coast, hundreds of men – many loaded on rum and beer – have crammed into rickety wooden coliseums to test their bravery with the bulls. I’ve spent more than a decade watching the corralejas, drinking the rum, seeing the bulls, learning the rules and eccentricities. Over an afternoon, 36 bulls are released, one at a time, to tear through the crowds of men. After five minutes or so, the bull is lassoed and led out of the ring, and the next animal barges out of the metal doors. Most of the men are there as voluntary cannon fodder for the spectacle. Their mission: stay off the bulls’ horns. The slow, the unlucky? The bull gets them. But a core of some 50 men are professional bullfighters like Bravo, who earn their living in front of the bull. The “Suicide Men”, they’re called. Injuries are daily. Deaths are common. Supporters and critics alike compare it to the gladiator games of ancient Rome.

In the stands above, tens of thousands watch the show, dancing to live orchestras. Old women, shots of rum in their hands, laughingly repeat the event’s motto: “If no one dies, it’s not a corraleja.”

It’s a six-day dark carnival of music, rum, blood and madness. One of the world’s deadliest sports – and its time might soon be up.

TRADITIONAL BULLFIGHTING WAS brought over to Colombia by the Spanish colonisers, an Old World pastime for the New. In Spain and parts of Latin America, they had corraleja-style events in small towns in eras past. Closing off the town plaza, men performed daredevil tricks with bulls

The corraleja stadium may soon be a thing of the past

provided by local wealthy cattlemen. But over time, these were outlawed or abandoned as too dangerous. Except here on Colombia's Caribbean coast. The history is murky, but the few historians of the corralejas believe they started in the first half of the 19th century in the flatlands of the provinces of Sucre and Córdoba, where the business is cattle. These are beautiful, baked landscapes topped with thick tropical clouds that cut like white mountain ranges against the pale-blue sky. The people along the Caribbean coast are known as Costeños. In the faces you see traces of Africa, Europe, and the Indigenous of the Americas. They are proud of their region, heritage and local eccentricities. Just half an hour down the highway from this corraleja, the town of San Antero holds its annual donkey beauty contest.

The World Bank confirms what your eyes see in this country of small oases of wealth surrounded by widespread need, calling Colombia "one of the most unequal countries in the world". Nearly 40 per cent of the country lives in poverty, close to 14 per cent in what is classified as extreme. These farmlands of the coast are concentrated in the hands of a small number of families, massive cattle ranches that stretch over the horizon. It feels close to feudal. And maybe that is part of this story: a legion of young men who know their chances of rising high are small, and so see in the ring a path. In the corralejas, the poor man can become someone, but the price is blood.

"This sport is for psychos," Bravo says. "Death is always at your side, even if you can't see her"

Spectators adore the event. They use words like "excitement"and "party" but mostly "tradition".

"I love the action ... the adrenalin of the bulls," says Cristina Osorio, standing outside of the ring. "There aren't any rules. Anything goes for the party. It's six days – enjoy yourself to the max." And then she says something you'll hear at every corraleja. "The corralejas – you carry this in your blood."

Luis Baldovino, a YouTuber who films corralejas for his El Show de Frijolito TV channel, comes whenever he can. "It's a passion – it's something that you can't put into words. The men express themselves in the ring fucking around with the bull." He laughs as if aware that what he says is both absurd and a stone-cold fact.

This affection is not shared by all those in Colombia. Gustavo Petro, the country's first left-wing president, has promised to end the corralejas.

"I've asked all the mayors of the country to stop organising shows of death," he tweeted. "Colombia is a country of beauty not savagery."

The president spoke for millions of Colombians who loathe the corralejas, calling it a blood sport, an abuse of animal and man. When videos of bullfighters dying go online, the comments can be split between commiserations and those cheering on the bull.

"My cause is the rights of animals," Sen. Andrea Padilla says in her crisp Bogotá accent. "Wherever they are victims of violence, me, and I know thousands of other Colombians, are ready to speak up."

A lifelong dedication to animal rights earned her a seat in Colombia's senate. She still

Inside the medical tent, nurses tended to Omar Lopez after a bull ripped open his leg

volunteers at animal-rescue foundations and sterilisation programmes for stray cats and dogs, and she wants the corralejas shut down – forever.

“These are shows of violence against animals, whose aim is to make the animal suffer, to torture them,” Padilla says, and she has introduced legislation that would ban the corralejas, as well as traditional bullfighting and cockfighting. “These are violent spectacles that are good for no one, and keep these towns submerged in a culture of bread and circus, and so they don’t get important necessities like health, education and safety.”

The bill advanced through the legislature, posing the biggest legal challenge to the corralejas, threatening to outlaw them (corralejas are only allowed in those parts with a tradition of holding such events).

And as it progressed, it was sunk in committee before it could reach a vote.

Padilla wants to put forward more legislation, but also intends to put the question to the Colombian people. “We’re moving forward with the referendum, where the citizens can decide if these cruel spectacles can keep existing in Colombia,” Padilla says. Sooner, not later, the corralejas will be banned, she adds.

The view among many of the locals, those who enjoy the corralejas: it’s not for everyone, but it’s important to us. “I’m born into this. It’s our thing. If you ask someone from the rest of the country, like Bogotá or Medellín, they may not like it. But this is our thing, it’s innate in us,” says Samuel Negrete, a doctor who for years has tended the drunk, heat-afflicted, and wounded of the corralejas.

THE TINY TOWN of Cotorra holds the “mother of the corralejas”, one of the largest and longest-running. A man steps into the ring, tall and skinny, kneels quickly, touches the dirt, and crosses himself. A legend of the sport, fans wave to him. Outside the ring, he is Sinibaldo España Saltarin. As he waits for the bull, he is Saltarin, the bullfighter.

“We’re gladiators,” says one bullfighter. “This is tradition, the human being against the beast”

“When I’m in the ring, I’m someone else. The world changes. It’s all different. I don’t know how to explain it. And when I step out of the ring, it changes back,” he says. Other bullfighters say the same: that the ring is another plane of existence, that life is sped up, concentrated, with all the dull bits removed.

Today, Saltarin wears a black T-shirt, jeans, and his trademark sunglasses. He is easygoing, with a ready smile. He carries a large cape, orange on one side, purple on the other, and a long scar across his neck, a reminder of when a bull was faster. I ask him what happened. “Not much. Only, the bull nearly ripped my veins out,” he says with a shrug and a laugh.

Now, he joins 10 other bullfighters in front of the big metal door to wait for the bulls as thousands look on. To step in front of the animal, these men must overcome primal survival instincts hardwired into our brains. “You can’t be scared, because then you’ll fail,” Saltarin says. “Fear makes you hesitate, it stops you from acting decisively. If you’re not going to act decisively, don’t do it.”

Bullfighter “Crazy Horse” returns to visit friends. He lost his leg due to a corraleja

Saltarin is a *capotero,* a man who uses a cape and theatricality to excite the crowd. The metallic door clangs open and the bull charges. He draws the bull in, waving his cape firmly, graceful and quick. The bull races forward. At the last moment, he steps to the side and the bull runs through the cloak, horns passing inches from Saltarin’s chest. The crowd cheers as he works the bull in a flurry of twists and turns, bringing the bull in, once, twice, three times.

"When you're working the cape, it's a dance, like I'm dancing with death," he tells me. "Death is a friend, loyal. She's always at your side, even if you can't see her."

Saltarin shouts at the bull and flicks the cape again to lure it in, and again the bull charges him. Again, at the last moment he steps out of the way. The audience cheers.

Saltarin grew up poor on farms in the countryside. A desire for some quick cash and to impress his friends and neighbours – and a taste for danger – led him to the corralejas.

"I don't have adrenalin, adrenalin lives in me," he cackles. "It drives you to do crazy things, all for the action. This addiction to adrenalin is dangerous."

In the ring, the complexities of modern life – bills, taxes, relationship dramas – all fade away. Existence, he says, becomes as simple as 'Will I triumph, or will I fail? Am I going to live or die?'

The bullfighters enjoy the old carnival life, travelling from town to town to risk their lives in these six-day spectacles. Beds are hammocks slung under the coliseum's stands, and breakfasts are cold beers. They go by names like "the Mask" (whose face has been disfigured repeatedly by bulls), "the Death" (once so savagely gored the audience was sure he had left this world for the next), "the Ball", "Mandarina". One goes by the name of "Dickface" (*Carechimba*), and I've never had the courage to ask him why. "Crazy Horse" is known for his cowboy hat and his little dances in the ring. In a 2022 corraleja, a bull was too quick, too strong, and brutally wounded him. Doctors struggled to save his life, and to do so, sawed off his left leg. Now, Crazy Horse returns to the corralejas to drink rum with his old bullfighting buddies with his shiny metal

The crowd hangs on to the grandstand — shaking the arena — provoking the bulls

leg. A stream of fans take selfies with him, and he accommodates each request with a smile.

This life is carved into the bodies of the bullfighters – crisscrossing scars. “Fifty-six gorings I’ve had,” says the Death, ugly scars crossing his body like a map. His life in the ring has left him only a few teeth.

Alvaro Nova is a rarity, one of those who survived long enough to retire. From the cosmopolitan Cartagena, he followed a bullfighting uncle into the ring more than 50 years ago, practising with young bulls when he was eight years old. His choice was the cape, waving it back and forth in front of the violent bull.

“It’s a sport because you must prepare yourself physically,” he says. “But more than that, it’s an art, like a song, like music, like a painting. They call it the ‘ballet of death’.” Nova retired because of the lack of steady money. “Here, we earn whatever pesos we can get – playing with our lives. This can be a tragedy,” he says, and chuckles. “I love the corralejas.”

This sport is too off the grid and chaotic to keep statistics, but deaths are common. I’m told that nine bullfighters were killed in the past few years. Unsurprisingly, the Suicide Men embrace the role of death in their lives. “We’re gladiators,” says Saltarin. “The fight of a man against animals, the way the slaves earned their

freedom. This tradition starts there. The human being against the beast."

THE CORRALEJAS ARE as much a party as a sporting event, and spectators and bullfighters spend the day drinking. Many of the bullfighters live in a haze of booze, starting in the morning. A few shots of rum before an afternoon of the bulls can steel nerves. In the ring, they pass bottles back and forth for quick swigs.

"No one sober would fight the bulls. You've got to be at least tipsy so you're less afraid of the bull," says the Ball, a personable bullfighter and one of the few whose face is not drawn in scars. "It's always better to be a little drunk with some rum in you."

Once the afternoon of bulls is over, the night comes with music and dancing, and the drinks keep flowing to now celebrate another day survived. Much of the money earned during the day is spent at the bars made of wooden planks that surround the arena. Bullfighters can be opaque about how much they earn. Rarely have I received a straight answer (and maybe it's none of my business). Some have told me that the wages are constantly going down, that just more than a decade ago they could earn at least 3 million pesos (about double the monthly minimum wage) for six days of work, and more in tips.

At 3pm, a huge firework explodes in the middle of the ring, announcing that the first bull is about to be released. The ring becomes a swirling mass of activity. Most of the hundreds of men below are the so-called ducks; amateurs, there to be close to the action, to test their bravery. They hang from fences, they run in front of the bull.

"When I'm in the ring, I'm someone else. The world changes. I don't know how to explain it"

Everything moves fast. A bull can sprint at 35 mph. Even if you're on the other side of the ring, you're never more than three or four seconds away from an irate bull bearing down on you like doom itself.

In the crowds, men sell to the thirsty, carrying buckets filled with ice and beer. And when the bull comes, they run for their lives like everyone else, careful not to drop a single can. Other men carry huge publicity banners for local businesses or politicians around the ring.

Men dress as devils and pose for photos, a clown walks around shouting jokes, a man enters the ring on his motorbike, which has a set of horns at the front, and drives through the crowd. And that's the point of a corraleja: it's this massive spectacle and everyone has their role, be it the spectator who funds it, the ducks who provide the thrills, or anyone else who wants to put on a show.

A dozen mounted horsemen huddle together. The horsemen are a key part of Spanish bullfighting, to tire the bull ahead of its final death at the hands of the matador. Here, the riders chase the bull around the ring. Another import from Spanish bullfighting are the *banderillas*, sticks wrapped in shredded paper and topped with harpoon-shaped blades. Some bullfighters run in front of the bulls to stick these in the beast's flanks, leaving bloody but shallow flesh wounds. But that the bull bleeds at all is reason enough for animal-rights advocates to call it "torture" and demand an end to the corralejas.

The wealthy cattlemen are the centre of gravity here. It's a group of 20 or so who share bottles of imported whiskey. There's a constant back and forth between the cattlemen and the bullfighters below as they negotiate money for each trick. A young man runs up and offers to do the "seat of death", a dangerous trick where the man must sit in front of a running bull and lie down at the last moment, and hope the bull somehow runs over him or doesn't stop to gore him. I've seen men mauled to death attempting this trick. The young man demands $60. The cattleman won't pay more than $20. No deal.

From the stands, spectators toss dozens of packs of sweets down onto the bulls, daring the men below to edge closer to the beast. One man throws a wad of cash down into the ring, creating a scrum of men scrambling in the cloud of bills. And if there's ever a slowdown in the pace of the afternoon, a spectator will shoot a firework into the crowd.

The fans salute a good bull's performance, his taste for the fight. The best bulls become legends. "Seven Boxes" earned his name after sending seven men to their coffins.

The sport's death toll makes the corralejas a world of ghosts. And sometimes they visit. Widows pass through the stands carrying large photos of their dead bullfighting husbands, their hands out in the hopes of a little help. Today, old man Moises Machado is led by a young man. Words on a large white collection box tell Machado's story, of how he once fought the bulls, but a goring left him voiceless and crippled.

Back in the ring, a bull shoots out of the metal door like a cannonball, and the audience cheers. He's tan, a large white line running down the centre of his face. The bull tears through the crowd as men run, narrowing in on one fleeing man. Screams rise through the crowd. A moment before the inevitable, the man puts out his hand as if that might stop the beast. The bull smashes into the man's waist

with such force it flips him in the air, his feet flying over his head. The blow sends him 20 feet across the ring, knocking a shoe off. He lands face first in the dirt, crumpled and motionless.

All of this occurs in seven seconds.

The bull trots to the other side of the ring while men pick up the young man and carry him out.

In the medical tent next to the coliseum, the doctors and nurses hear the screams as the young man is flipped by the bull. That's their sign that a man has become a patient and is on his way. "Medical tent" is a grand term for four metal poles with a tarpaulin roof. Samuel Negrete, a doctor at the local hospital, today is running the medical team of another doctor and five nurses. Two ambulances are ready to go, their back doors open, their engines running.

The man is delivered motionless and quickly put on one of the medical tables. There's a question as to whether he's dead or not. Negrete checks his signs – he's alive and lucky, the bull's horn hasn't pierced him. As Negrete looks the man over, crowds of people encircle the tent, craning to see the day's injured.

After five minutes, the man regains consciousness, but is groggy and unsure where he is. A neck brace is fitted, and he's driven to the local hospital.

"A normal day is five, six, seven injured. They're injured in their throats, abdomen, their heads," says Negrete during a brief break between patients. A common injury is men being gored in their anuses. "It happens a lot. The man is running away from the bull and the bull reaches him, and the part most affected is the anus. There are tears and punctures."

The tent provides triage – there's a limit to what they can do with bandages and a couple of medical beds. "Sometimes they come in with total cardiac arrest and die right away. If there is serious trauma to the thorax region, it's sometimes impossible to save them in a setup as basic as this one... There are afternoons when there are two or three deaths."

Negrete is young and personable. He enjoys the corralejas even as he's conflicted over the price of the spectacle. "Ninety per cent who arrive here are not the bullfighters, but the ducks, those who went looking for death," he says. "It's frustrating – because you ask yourself, 'Why did they risk their life?'"

We're interrupted by another collective scream from the ring – another patient is on his way.

Omar Lopez is carried in by his friends. He's a young bullfighter in his twenties, his left trouser leg drenched in blood. He grimaces, keeping his eyes off the wound. His sister, Yuli, follows him.

"Look at you! What's our mother going to say?"

Sheepish, Lopez lies on the medical cot as Negrete cuts off the trouser leg. The bull's horn has ripped open his left knee. Lopez clenches his teeth and looks away. Blood pours out of his leg.

"The bull got him. It went for him three times, and he didn't understand it was trying to kill him," says the sister, watching Negrete tend to her brother's leg. Her face veers between anger and concern. "It's not the first time a bull almost killed him. My mother will die if she hears."

Negrete and the nurses clean the wound, bandage the gash. For a nasty cut, Lopez is in good spirits, now laughing and winking with the nurses. He's an eight-year veteran of the corralejas.

"I'll be back in the ring as soon as I can," he says. "Maybe tomorrow?" He hobbles back to the stands to show off his wound and ask for tips.

"Death is hard to take. To see a friend die, gored by the bull, that's when you feel the fear... It could happen to you"

Over the afternoons, the tent also tends to people passed out from the heat. The sun hits hard here, with temperatures that hover around 100 degrees and people crammed into the stands. One day, three women are brought in, passed out from the heat.

"We live this every day in the time of the bulls," says Negrete.

Negrete and the nurses sit for a break. And then come the screams, and up they jump, ready for the next patient. The flow of patients reminds me of the field hospital I saw outside Mosul as the Iraqi army battled ISIS.

Luis Sandoval, 62, is carried in by four men, their arms covered by his blood. His face is pale, his shirt and jeans both drip red with blood. On the back of his thigh is a hole that pumps dark blood onto the cot. Negrete applies pressure to the wound and finally manages to maintain a bandage over the wound.

Sandoval, says a friend, was in the ring, hanging from the fence. The bull stopped beneath him, reared itself up, and gored him then and there.

Now, Negrete moves to the second wound, in Sandoval's side. As he treats the dark hole, Sandoval's intestines slither out, like pink sausages. Negrete cups the intestines and tries to push them back in, but they won't go. Those peering into the tent gasp at the sudden stench.

"His intestines have been pierced," a nurse shouts.

Sandoval looks straight ahead, away from his wounds. There's terror in his eyes, and his skin greys by the second.

Finally, Negrete bandages the wound, an ugly bulge of the intestines visible under the gauze. Negrete has saved his life, but Sandoval needs surgery if he's going to survive. As the old man is carried to the back of the ambulance, more screams come from the ring. And the music never stops for a second.

AS THE DAYS stretch on, the corralejas take on a dream state. It's where you eat, where you see your friends, where you dance and listen to music, where you drink rum until you fall asleep, wake up and do it again. A dark party that never ends. One night, I dream of charging bulls.

"When you live in this world, it traps you – it's a spell," says Saltarin. "You don't focus on the dead, you look away, you look at the people having a good time... And the party never stops, it keeps going."

The Death calls it the "devil's party", a dark carnival you can never leave. "The money you make here is cursed, only meant to be spent drinking rum."

For some, it becomes a vortex impossible to escape from. The last time I saw Bravo, the man who jumps over the bull, he was bathing his baby daughter in his house and thinking about retiring from the sport. "I've been thinking I'm giving away my life for nothing," he said. "I have to think 'How can I help my baby if I'm dead?'"

Bravo would quickly spiral out of control. The constant rum led him to harder drugs. The money made risking his life in the ring went to feed his addiction. The star of the corralejas fell to living on the streets, cut off from his family. Someone posted his photo on Facebook looking for any friends and family to help him. Bravo stands there in filthy clothes, a man lost to addiction, demons now in control.

Some try to plan an exit from the corralejas, to not let the arena win. Mandarina is one of the legends of the sport. "In bullfighting," he says, "you want to leave this in the best way possible, leaving behind the best image of yourself." He's instantly recognisable for his black shoulder-length curly hair, a deep scar that cuts along his jaw, ending at his lips, a memento of the afternoon when the bull got too close. Among the rough Suicide Men, Mandarina is a gentleman, nicely turned out – jeans, a shirt, white trainers (the nickname comes from a childhood job of selling the fruit on the street).

The capoteros use a cape and theatricality in the ring to excite the crowd

For nearly 20 years, Mandarina and Saltarin have travelled together, brothers in the corralejas. But the deaths of the bullfighters haunt him.

"Death is hard to take. To see a friend die, gored by the bull, that's when you feel the fear. Just as it happened to him, it could happen to you," he says, thoughtful. "In this moment, I've got a touch of this fear in me. When you face off against the bull and you feel the fear, you really know fear."

Mandarina thinks on his family: his young daughter and son. "I've set up a little farm, so when I retire from the corralejas, I'll have something," he tells me. "I don't know when that's going to happen because I'm still young."

Mandarina is one of the few who you can imagine in a life beyond the rum, meeting death in a bed at a ripe old age, far from a rampaging bull's horns.

And I wish the story had ended that way.

On the first afternoon of the corralejas in the town of Planeta Rica, in a hellish heat, Mandarina works the ring. Saltarin is in the stands, a bad feeling telling him to skip the bulls that day. "I told Mandarina not to work that afternoon. I was watching in the stands ..." and he runs out of words.

The bull charges out of the metal door, dark brown, 400 kilos of mass on a mission to destroy. A bullfighter tries to work the cape, but the bull charges right past him and lands heavy into Mandarina's chest. He's flipped in the air, landing on his back. The bull curves around, his head lowered, horns at the attack – and repeatedly stabs Mandarina, shoving him across the ring until he's pinned against the fence. The audience screams in horror. Mandarina is dead at 47.

In between the corralejas, to raise a little extra money, Mandarina was working as a motorcycle taxi. One life where he's a star in the ring, adored by tens of thousands, and another life where he ferries people around on the back of his bike for 50 cents a trip.

Mandarina was buried with honours in his hometown, hundreds lining the streets to say goodbye as bullfighters and bands marched in the funeral procession. One swirls Mandarina's cape around for a final twirl. And then he is buried amid music and tears.

A few months later, Saltarin would lose another companion in the corralejas, "El Mono Villegas", one more death in the afternoon.

"I thought about retirement after losing two friends. I was going to retire," Saltarin says, a tear rolling down his cheek. "I said that I was leaving. No one accepted it. They insulted me. They called me a coward." Rising, he gives me a fist bump and walks off.

When I catch up with him a few months later, he tells me he's quit. "I want to change my life. I've left the corralejas," he says. "Almost all my friends have become memories. I don't want to become a memory, Toby."

I feel relief. I had been haunted by my last memories of him at the corralejas: walking by himself after drinking with friends. He seemed alone in the world, knowing that soon another bottle of rum will be opened, the big metal door will swing wide, and a bull will charge out as a man steps forward, risking all to give the audience another show. ®

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Reviews

Music

A GENRE-DEFINING DEBUT

Jungle scene-leader breaks new ground on debut album

Nia Archives

Silence is Loud

Island Records

★★★★★

THE MUSIC OF Nia Archives transcends the rave more than most club-rooted artists. But, ever since her bedroom-start breakthrough in 2020, the DJ, producer, singer and songwriter has imbued her jungle heaters with heartfelt emotion. It's for this reason – as well as the TikTok-aided rise in popularity of drum'n'bass and jungle – that she has become one of the UK's biggest names.

Having introduced a new generation →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Paris Anthony-Walker

of clubgoers to the scene via her collagist soundscapes which obliterate conventional ideas of the genre, the long wait for the Bradford-born, Leeds-raised artist's debut album is over, and the outcome proves it was more than worth it. *Silence is Loud* boasts plenty of intense bass lines to keep jungle purists satisfied, but the record's intricately detailed, narrative-driven songs make this a collection to be experienced in full, from start to finish.

Building on the heart-on-sleeve terrain of her third EP, *Sunrise Bang Ur Head Against tha Wall*, the 13-tracker is deeply personal and affecting. As alluded to in its fittingly multi-layered title, the 24-year-old producer, DJ, singer and songwriter may have ascended to a life of headline tours, global festivals, fashion shows and daytime radio plays, but that doesn't mean it's all glitz and glamour. Sometimes, spending time alone can often be more challenging than being in a room full of people. The loneliness that follows a massive show or career-high moment can feel like an elevator crashing to the floor.

The spiralling screams of the album's opening title track, which makes a great if unlikely pairing of jungle and gloomy Britpop, channel this dichotomy of melancholy and euphoria perfectly. Fellow sad banger 'Crowded Roomz' has the same impact thanks to its rippling guitar riffs and ominous piano keys. Both tracks are sure to resonate with anyone struggling with their mental health.

While Archives spends time in reflective mode, elsewhere the record is full of songs about love and heartbreak. Sequenced early on, the acoustic guitar strums and singalong chorus of 'Cards on the Table' conjure the type of infatuated pop song that you might hear on a summer holiday – just with added jungle breaks. 'Tell Me What It's Like', contrastingly, channels her frustration with an uncaring love interest, while the brilliant, relatable opening line of 'Nightmares' – *"All of my friends hate you / To be fair I do too"* – recalls the razor-sharp pen of early Lily Allen.

The album's biggest surprise, however, is the reprise of 'Silence is Loud', which demonstrates a raw vulnerability not unlike Adele. By stripping away the backing production and leaving just poignant piano keys, the gear change affords Nia the space to showcase the range of her vocal.

By using jungle music as the core foundation, but weaving in diaristic, often heart-stirring lyricism and elements of other disparate genres (there's even a flute on 'Out of Options'), Nia Archives breaks the rules time and again to build a sonic world of her own. **BEN JOLLEY**

PRESSING REFRESH ON POST-PUNK

English Teacher

This Could Be Texas

Island Records

★★★★☆

POST-PUNK HAS BECOME a loaded term for bands – especially British ones – over the past five years. Ever since the explosion surrounding the Brixton Windmill scene that birthed Shame, Black Midi, Goat Girl, Dry Cleaning and more, the term has been lauded and derided in equal measure, as any ascendant scene tends to do. Leeds' English Teacher have been tagged under the umbrella since their emergence in 2021, and while it's been a fairly accurate description so far, their far-reaching and impressive debut album *This Could Be Texas* should ensure they won't be purely remembered for this moment alone.

"I want this album to feel like you've gone to space, and it turns out it's almost identical to Doncaster," enigmatic vocalist Lily Fontaine said of the album, and while the record does indulge in ideas of mundanity, it's also determined to break away from it. *"I'm the world's biggest paving slab / So watch your fucking feet!"* she sing-speaks on the album's best track, 'The World's Biggest Paving Slab', but what follows is a soaring chorus that lifts the music out of the doldrums and into a place that sounds nothing like Doncaster at all.

Backed by inventive, bright guitar music, Fontaine discusses ideas around identity ("When people ask where I'm from, I usually say I'm mixed race: half Yorkshire, half Lancashire," she has joked) with seriousness but also levity. This moulding of different sounds and moods is also reflected in the music: after the solemn and surging 'Broken Biscuits', they move straight into the Smiths-esque sprightly indie-pop of 'I'm Not Crying, You're Crying'. Fontaine is equally magnetic on the acoustic slowie 'Mastermind Specialism', while debut single 'R&B' still sounds as fresh as ever as she laughs at assumptions made about her genre of choice based on her skin colour.

While 'R&B' represents the band's post-punk roots, the most exciting moments of the album come when it pushes forwards into new sounds and moods. The excellent 'The Best Tears of Your Life' sees her vocals twisted and manipulated by subtle Auto-Tune as the band concoct a Radiohead-ish swirl of noise behind her, while closer 'Albert Road' is a gorgeous slow jam and an ode to her hometown.

This Could Be Texas presents an exciting new voice in a saturated scene, one they deserve to graduate from as a band with limitless potential. Across the album, English Teacher sing of home and of being stuck, but the glorious noise they create makes you believe they could go anywhere. **WILL RICHARDS**

ENGLISH TEACHER: TATIANA POZUELO, THE LIBERTINES: ED COOKE, YARD ACT: AARON PARSONS

THE MELLOWING OF THE LIKELY LADS

SERENITY. PEACE AND love. They're all adjectives you wouldn't associate with the famously tumultuous fortunes of The Libertines, but on their fourth album it seems like the Likely Lads have finally mellowed.

Peter Doherty, a mainstay of the noughties tabloids, has found something close to domestic bliss after hunkering down in France with his wife and young child and ditching hard drugs for, according to the man himself, posh cheese instead.

The rest of the band, meanwhile, have been ploughing their efforts into The Albion Rooms, their Margate hotel and recording studio.

Carl Barât told Rolling Stone UK last year: "At this time, we're in the best possible place I think we can be."

The Libertines

All Quiet on the Eastern Esplanade

Casablanca and Republic Records

★★★★☆

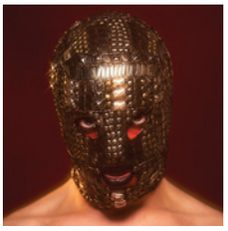
As a result of all of the above, *All Quiet on the Eastern Esplanade* is a complete riot which sees them leaning into the ramshackle charm of their early highs. On the lead single 'Run Run Run', the group firmly look back at their noughties infamy, crying over garage rock guitars: "*You'd better run, run, run boy / Faster than the past / Through the looking glass*."

Similarly, Doherty's obsession with the concept of Albion (the Old English term for Great Britain) is given an interesting spin on 'Merry Old England', which tackles the refugee crisis and, by extension, social issues in a way that the group have never managed before.

For fans of their softer side, meanwhile, 'Night of the Hunter' often feels like the sonic sequel to fan favourite 'Music When the Lights Go Out'.

There's no reinvention of the wheel to be found here, but The Libertines have taken the DNA of their noughties heyday and injected it with an all-important modern gaze and a dose of personal perspective. Crucially, it's really fun. Die-hard fans will lap it up. NICK REILLY

LASTING IMPRESSION



Lynks

Abomination

Heavenly Recordings

★★★★☆

'I STARTED LYNKS AS almost a novelty thing," the gimp-masked pop powerhouse told Rolling Stone UK last year. "Now, I'm not just a clown," they added, "I am a clown, but I'm also a clown that makes banging dance music. It's a nice realisation to come to, and writing some songs that were a bit more emotional than, for example, 'How to Make a Bechamel Sauce In 10 Steps', really helped and they still resonated with people."

While humour is a vital and irreplaceable part of Lynks' music, long-awaited debut album *Abomination* delivers on this promise and presents them as a genuinely brilliant pop star instead of a novelty act. These two forms work best when they're presented in tandem: opening track 'Use It or Lose It' discusses hookups in your twenties with outlandish humour ("*it's gotta be a 12-month hot girl summer*"), but also addresses ageist ideas around gay sex. In 'Tennis Song', they recount unrequited love with a straight tennis coach ("*You made a gay boy love sports / That's not easy to do*") and unfulfilling dating app sex on '(What Did You Expect From) Sex with A Stranger'.

Abomination pushes Lynks into new territory musically as well as lyrically. The filthy, bassy hooks are still here in abundance, but 'Tennis Song' and 'Lucky' are lo-fi gems, while closer 'Flash in the Pan' is a giddy and bright indie-pop smash. This is an album that loses none of Lynks' trademark filth and charm while adding crucial extra depth and nuance. WILL RICHARDS

ACE, TOP, MINT, BOSS...

SINCE RELEASING THEIR debut album *The Overload*, Yard Act have scaled the heights that any fledgling band would bite your hand off for. A collaboration with Elton John, sell-out tours and scoring a Mercury Prize nomination for their debut are just a few of these.

But success, as frontman James Smith notes on their second album *Where's My Utopia?*, doesn't necessarily translate to happiness. Instead, as that title suggests, it's a record written through the eyes of Smith as he searches for a sense of fulfilment. As a result, there's soul-searing honesty on the brooding 'Petroleum', which was inspired by the time when Smith turned on an audience at Butlins in early 2023 after experiencing burn-out from intense touring. Similarly, 'Down by the Stream' sees Smith turn his gaze on his childhood in a tune peppered with an unexpected hip-hop groove.

That groove, in fact, defines album two. If their debut saw the group wrongly pigeonholed as the latest in a long line of post-punk revival champions, this latest record proves that they're a far greater creative proposition than that.

Instead, *Where's My Utopia?* is packed with bangers. 'We Make Hits' – perhaps the most direct example of the record's soul-searching mantra – bounds along with an 80s dance groove. And Smith's central refrain on 'Dream Job': "*Ace! Top! Mint! Boss!*" has already become the band's unofficial catchphrase for the coming year.

Running through all of it is the subtle strain of positivity that runs deep in the band's DNA. On closer 'A Vineyard for the North', their spiritual successor to first album standout '100% Endurance', the group use climate change as a framing device to show why we should all keep dancing through the darkness.

Yard Act

Where's My Utopia?

Island Records

★★★★☆

All considered, it's an album that feels like a real step up and one that broadens the possibilities of Yard Act's brilliantly wonky sound. It's ace, top, mint and, indeed, boss... NICK REILLY

Sawai stars as Toda Mariko, Blackthorne's star-crossed lover

T.V.

SHŌGUN IS FX'S *GAME OF THRONES*

Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks' towering epic about a foreigner in feudal Japan is absolutely stunning

JAMES CLAVELL'S epic historical novel *Shōgun* was first adapted for television back in 1980. It starred Richard Chamberlain as John Blackthorne, an English sailor who gets caught up in a Japanese civil war in the early 1600s, and Japanese-cinema legend Toshirô Mifune as Yoshi Toranaga, a feudal lord at odds with the rest of his country's ruling class. This NBC version did not feature subtitles, so the Japanese dialogue was only translated in scenes where characters were interpreting for Blackthorne. The producers treated Clavell's three-dimensional Japanese characters as exotic supporting players in a white man's story.

The new FX adaptation knows better. The majority of the dialogue is in subtitled Japanese, and it treats Blackthorne (played here by Cosmo Jarvis) and Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada) at least as narrative equals, if not making Toranaga the central character.

Adapted by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks, this new *Shōgun* digs deep into the Japanese culture of the period, and the many complicated ways it has shaped Toranaga, Blackthorne's translator, Toda Mariko (Anna Sawai), and everyone else we meet along the way. It is beautiful to look at, operating on a scale much closer to *Game of Thrones* than to anything FX has done in the past.

Shogun

NETWORK	Disney+
AIR DATE	New episodes releasing every Tuesday
STARRING	Hiroyuki Sanada Cosmo Jarvis Anna Sawai Tadanobu Asano Shinnosuke Abe Fumi Nikaidô

The story still begins from Blackthorne's point of view, as his damaged ship winds up in a port controlled by Toranaga. He has come to plunder a land populated by, as he puts it, "a savage horde", and is startled to learn that the Japanese consider him a disgusting barbarian. In time, he recognises the many ways that life in Japan is superior to the world he left behind, like regular bathing. But

Sanada is Yoshii Toranaga, a feudal lord

Cosmo Jarvis stars as Blackthorne

KATIE YU/FX, 2

he also learns that the nationwide dedication to honour at all costs cuts both ways, inspiring great deeds of heroism and sacrifice, but also baffling, at times monstrous behaviour when people feel compelled to commit the ritual suicide of seppuku for seemingly minor offences. Mariko warns John not to be fooled by everyone's polite demeanour, and he slowly recognises that her own life is a constant struggle due to questions of honour and a woman's role in society.

The cast is wonderful. Sanada's charisma and intense stillness makes it wholly believable that Toranaga is a brilliant strategist who is always five moves ahead of his many enemies. Sawai speaks volumes with every pained look on Mariko's face. As duplicitous warrior Yabushige, Tadanobu Asano entertainingly channels the *Seven Samurai*-era Mifune. Jarvis's performance is deliberately bigger, but that only underlines how alien he is in this beautiful place.

The Clavell book has epic sweep, which the show takes pains to recreate. There are stunning, massive set pieces, like an earthquake that wrecks one of the armies at an inopportune moment. There's the star-crossed love story between Mariko and Blackthorne, complicated feuds between the various Japanese lords and vassals, interference from Catholic missionaries from Portugal, and more. The series occasionally loses its grip on some threads, but on the whole does a beautiful job of translating this huge story to the screen. It even succeeds at making Mariko's gift for freestyle poetry seem as potent a weapon as the cannons Blackthorne brought from Europe.

Mariko has converted to Catholicism, and is uncomfortable hearing the Protestant Blackthorne curse out the representatives of her faith. Toranaga, who needs her to stay close to this unlikely ally, asks if her loyalty to God would be in conflict with her service to him. Mariko replies that this would be an issue if she were just a Christian, "but I have more than one heart." This *Shōgun* has many hearts, and many points of view, rather than fixating on the simplistic stranger-in-a-strange-land story from the 80s. It's terrific.

ALAN SEPINWALL

Clarence (LaKeith Stanfield) and Varinia (Anna Diop) in *The Book of Clarence*

Film

THE SECOND COMING

***In search of a better life, a contemporary of Jesus decides to become a messiah in* The Book of Clarence**

The Book of Clarence

STARRING Anna Diop, LaKeith Stanfield, Omar Sy

DIRECTED BY Jeymes Samuel

★★★★☆

BRITISH musician Jeymes Samuel, aka The Bullitts, announced himself as a bold filmmaking talent with 2021's *The Harder They Fall*, a revisionist Western featuring Idris Elba, Regina King and LaKeith Stanfield. He puts Stanfield centre stage in *The Book of Clarence*, a ballsy riff on an even more old-fashioned genre: the Biblical epic. It's a riotous ride with obvious comparisons to the likes of *The Life of Brian*, but its thoughtful take on faith and race also won praise from liberal Christians when it came out in the US earlier this year. Samuel – who is Seal's younger brother – composed his own score, and weaves in well-chosen songs from artists including Shabba Ranks and producer JAY-Z.

Stanfield brings heart and humour as Clarence, a contemporary of Jesus who scrapes a living out of con tricks and petty crime. He's a smart guy who makes stupid decisions. Envious of Jesus's fame, he decides the best way to make a fortune is to pretend to be a messiah. But he can only get so far with his con-artist skills when his enemies include Jedidiah the Terrible (Eric Kofi-Abrefa) and Pontius Pilate (James McAvoy). With a majority Black cast, this makes a wry statement about the white-washed Biblical epics of past decades, as well as opening up opportunities to explore racial and class tensions (the Roman soldiers are white).

David Oyelowo plays John the Baptist, who has little time for Clarence's games, while Omar Sy makes for a brilliant Barabbas and Brit Michael Ward is Judas Iscariot. Benedict Cumberbatch has a small but significant role. Alfre Woodard brings her usual gravitas as the Virgin Mary, while Teyana Taylor plays the rather less virginal Mary Magdalene. With other key female roles filled by Anna Diop and Marianne Jean-Baptiste, it's a fantastic cast, though most of the supporting roles remain just that: this is Clarence's show. Jesus himself is rarely seen, and it'd be a minor spoiler to say who plays him.

The Book of Clarence stands on its own as a comedy-drama with engaging characters and an emotive narrative, but it's probably best enjoyed by those vaguely familiar with the Bible, regardless of their beliefs. Samuel has put a lot of thought, detail and knowledge of the New Testament into his screenplay, using familiar characters to play with tropes and to make a point. It might seem like an unlikely story to come from the pen of a Londoner, but then – like Clarence himself – Samuel definitely has the power to surprise. *19 APRIL*

ANNA SMITH

THE BOOK OF CLARENCE: © 2023 LEGENDARY ENTERTAINMENT; *THE TROUBLE WITH JESSICA*: COURTESY OF PARKLAND PICTURES; *MOTHERS' INSTINCT*: ALYSSA LONGCHAMP; *DRIFT*: NIKOS NIKOLOPOULOS

Indira Varma plays the uninvited guest, Jessica

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

The Trouble with Jessica

STARRING
Shirley Henderson, Alan Tudyk

DIRECTED BY
Matt Winn

★★★★☆

YOU KNOW WHAT it's like when someone brings an unwelcome guest to a dinner party – barbed comments, boozing, dead bodies... OK, that last part is the invention of British director Matt Winn, who has co-written this darkly witty comedy lampooning middle-class, middle-aged angst. He's assembled a terrific cast: Shirley Henderson is wickedly brilliant as Sarah, a seemingly respectable mother who will apparently do anything to protect the upcoming sale of the home she shares with Tom (Alan Tudyk) and their family. Their best friends are Beth (Olivia Williams) and Richard (Rufus Sewell), a couple with seemingly contrasting moral codes. The unwelcome guest is Jessica (Indira Varma), an unstable friend of Beth's who has history with everyone in the room. Some of the film's tension revolves around revealing the nature of that history – the rest revolves around a group of supposedly intelligent people making terrible choices involving a dead body. While that part of the scenario may be hard to swallow, the characters and their reactions feel frighteningly, often frustratingly, real. *The Trouble with Jessica* isn't an easy watch but it's a smart and funny one with excellent performances from a top British cast. *5 APRIL* **ANNA SMITH**

UNBREAKABLE BOND

Mothers' Instinct

STARRING
Jessica Chastain, Anne Hathaway

DIRECTED BY
Benoît Delhomme

★★★★☆

ANNE HATHAWAY AND Jessica Chastain are a match made in Hollywood heaven, and they're both well suited to playing wealthy mothers who might just have a dark side. And so *Mothers' Instinct* has a lot going for it from the off, as the talented twosome play close friends in 60s suburbia, complete with cocktail-swilling dinner parties and identikit husbands who go off to work every morning in their suits, leaving the ladies at home in their dresses and heels. While Céline (Hathaway) seems happy to play housewife, Alice (Chastain) misses her career. But all their lives are turned upside down after a tragic accident, and the two women are pulled apart in a cycle of grief and blame. The movie then shifts from a drama into thriller territory.

Mothers' Instinct is based on the French language film *Duelles*, directed by Olivier Masset-Depasse, which in turn was inspired by *Mothers' Instinct: A Novel of Suspense* by Barbara Abel. It's a slick and thought-provoking watch that is ultimately more disturbing than thrilling, but it's well worth seeing for the powerhouse performances from two actors at the top of their game. *27 MARCH* **ANNA SMITH**

Anne Hathaway and Jessica Chastain as best friends in *Mothers' Instinct*

Cynthia Erivo (right) with co-star Alia Shawkat

LIFE ON THE EDGE OF SOCIETY

Drift

STARRING
Cynthia Erivo, Alia Shawkat

DIRECTED BY
Anthony Chen

★★★★☆

CYNTHIA ERIVO PLAYS Jacqueline, a refugee in this compassionate character study set on a Greek island. The camera follows her closely, showing the details of her daily routine while gradually revealing her traumatic backstory. Lonely, penniless and proud, she secretly sleeps in a cave and pretends to be a tourist, or a masseur, depending on who she's speaking to. It's a compelling exercise in empathy, inviting us to relate to those who are judged for being forced to live life on the fringes. But it's also a story of hope and kindness. Alia Shawkat puts in a lovely, charismatic performance as a sympathetic tour guide who makes friends with Jacqueline, as does Honor Swinton Byrne in a smaller role. Meanwhile, Erivo, fresh from an impressive turn in *Luther: The Fallen Sun*, continues to prove her versatility and talent with a riveting central performance. *29 MARCH* **ANNA SMITH**

STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

Track record

Founder and creative director of Palm Angels Francesco Ragazzi said at his Spring/Summer 24 show, "Whenever I design a collection, I always think of our (skater) community and its cultural contribution." Ragazzi has continued this ethos in his designs for the new season while also exploring the evolution of the brand. The Palm Angels' logo and monogram, which is in 'continuous updating' mode, goes from macro to micro, and has been paired with palm leaf prints. Denim has a high profile in the SS24 collection, with workwear and leisure hybrid styles given a new, overdyed finish that mimics brush strokes. Palm Angels' staples have had an update too: its beloved tracksuit now features linen and a cotton piqué embossed effect, while its regular denim-coloured chambray and satin printed pieces now include animalier, paisley and colour-block designs. And for finishing touches, the Georgina Bag and the PA 4 sneakers complete the streetwear aesthetic. Like the city of Los Angeles, Palm Angels is continuing to evolve while keeping its core visuals and the values of LA's streetwear subcultures alive.
palmangels.com

Precious cargo

In Versace's Spring/Summer 24 collection, the humble cargo pant is entering accessory territory in the form of the Versace Cargo Bag. Just like the infamous trousers, the messenger-style bag features multiple pockets, with three detachable pouches that you can mix and match, while its adjustable strap offers various carrying options. Crafted from high-sheen leather in monochrome shades, with hand-painted edges and subtle Versace logo placements, it's a quintessentially Versace take on the cargo pant classic.
versace.com

Thrash it out

Palace has teamed up with legendary skateboard magazine *Thrasher* for its latest range. The collab collection features a co-branded logo that unites the *Thrasher* font synonymous with the publication and the iconic Palace flame. The capsule includes a black nylon jacket, crew-neck knitted sweaters, hoodies, classic tees, beanies, trucker caps and a duffel backpack – all of which would land perfectly on either the skate ramps of San Francisco, or under the arches in London, where *Thrasher* and Palace were founded.
palaceskateboards.com

Boxing clever

The iconic Burberry knit check pattern and its Equestrian Knight motif have found their way onto the British brand's latest sneakers. The Leather and Check Knit box trainers come in two different designs in hazy hues of Daffodil, Knight, Baby Neon, Black, White, Primrose and Salt Check (pictured) that feel as fresh as the first blossoms of the season. The Italian-made Leather and Check Knit Box sneakers have mesh-lined features, while barbed-wire hardware on the laces and rubber soles harden the trainers' aesthetic and inject a little 90s cool.
burberry.com

Art on your sleeve

Uniqlo's graphic T-shirt brand UT has launched its first collection from its partnership with the Tate, which began in 2016. Curated by Tate includes pieces featuring artwork from four artists in the Tate's collection: Bob and Roberta Smith, known for his brightly coloured 'slogan' art; printmaker Nicholas Monro, who was inspired by the Pop Art movement; abstract artist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, and sculptor and contemporary artist Alexander Calder. Their works have been chosen because they embody the spirit of play, an ethos of the partnership which has evolved over the years with a series of programmes to invite people of all ages to get creative, learn and explore art.
uniqlo.com

Get your kicks

The new L003 2K24 trainer celebrates Lacoste's flair for sportswear. The 2K24 is a technical dream, including an elevated lightweight running-inspired design, special anti-slip spikes that keep you grounded, a comfortable EVA midsole and TPU reinforcement. There's plenty of detail on the footwear too, such as a multi-panelled upper of mesh, suede and a synthetic leather overlay. The dual colourways include a nod to Lacoste's ongoing tennis love affair with a classic white/green combination, as well as yellow/black, orange/green and a refined white/red/blue. The beloved crocodile features too of course. The French brand is a master at having one foot in its archive and one in the contemporary world, which is no more evident than in their campaign, which stars critically acclaimed musician J.I.D.
lacoste.com

SPOTLIGHT

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Field day

Scottish luxury brand Johnstons of Elgin is staying close to its roots by turning to nature for inspiration for its unisex Pre-Spring 2024 collection. The Tonal Transitions range has been influenced by the energy and light of golden oat fields, bringing forth a fresh, natural colour palette with pops of burnt orange and breezy blues, as well as beautiful ombres that evoke an early-morning sunrise. The aim of the line is to create a sumptuously soft range whose versatility reflects the changing seasons of the beautiful Scottish countryside. There's plenty to drape and layer, with classic, slouchy cashmere pieces, including a crochet and cable cashmere cardigan, as well as houndstooth and plain balmacaan wool coats, check prints and marl tops and skirts that show off the brand's pedigree in crafting clothes.

johnstonsofelgin.com

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Future nostalgia

Prada, always light years ahead with everything it creates, has reinvigorated its eyewear range with innovative design. The ultra-light runway sunglasses display a futuristic aesthetic, with semi-rimless frames and slick, soft curves to counter the rectangular lenses. The peach tones cohere beautifully with the Spring/Summer 24 menswear ready-to-wear collection, which mixes a softer colour palette and billowing shapes with tougher silhouettes. *prada.com*

FAVOURITE THINGS

BB0192S rectangular-frame sunglasses, £360, by Balenciaga at Selfridges

Bronson aviator tortoiseshell-acetate sunglasses, £320, by Tom Ford

Maydela sun sunglasses, £325, at Moscot

WORDS & STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN; PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDDIE BLAGBROUGH; MODEL: SHELDON AT SELECT MODELS; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ELVIRE ROUX AT CAROL HAYES USING MERIT MAKEUP AND HAIR BY SAM MCKNIGHT; FASHION ASSISTANT: AARON PANDHER

Range Rover Sport SV

RS ROAD TEST

A two-and-a-half tonne SUV that doubles as a supercar may sound unlikely, but so expansive is the bandwidth of the new Sport SV that Range Rover has delivered just that

I have no intention of robbing a bank, officer. Absolutely not. Nothing to see here, please move along.

However, entirely hypothetically you understand, *were* I to succumb to the temptation of ill-gotten gains, then the new Range Rover Sport SV would likely be both a) the perfect getaway car — four adults in comfort, plenty of room for the loot, will outrun any panda car across any terrain — and b) the requisite opportunity to launder north of £180k in exchange for the (already sold-out) Edition One specification you see here. Though it's a bit chicken and egg, I guess, as without robbing a bank most of us aren't going to have the readies for this set of wheels in the first place.

That said, it's the same money you'd need for an Aston Martin DBX, Bentley Bentayga or Lamborghini Urus, each similarly specified and (variously) as capable, as well assembled and as quick. So maybe it's less about if you could, and more about if you *should*. To which (spoiler

alert), the answer is an emphatic yes. And here's why.

The Range Rover has, forever, been the first and most convincing of the high-end, multi-purpose, go-anywhere, do-anything SUVs. Others, individually, may squeak it on performance, or luxury, or supercar brand status, but none has quite the bandwidth of a Range Rover. It is supreme off-road, sublime on it, has a unique, classless cachet all its own and, simply put, can do more, more of the time. It's a Swiss army knife of a thing, if the Swiss army were based out of Fortnum and Mason.

The Sport model, as the name suggests, is a slightly more sporting take on the full-fat Rangie formula, oft-favoured by footballers and/or their wives and girlfriends. But it's a two-and-a-half tonne 4x4, so it's a matter of degree — there's only so much sport you can add. Until now, that is. Because it's fair to say the new Range Rover Sport SV rewrites a number of laws, those of physics among them.

The visual clues are there: a deeper front end newly wearing side vents, quad tailpipes out back and swollen rear arches to house 23-inch wheels (made of carbon fibre for a further £6,900 if you wish, with brakes to match for £7,000 more). And the SV doesn't flatter to deceive — beneath the (also carbon-fibre) bonnet is a BMW-sourced, 4.4-litre, twin-turbo V8 pushing out 626 horses that move this leviathan from 0-62mph in 3.8 seconds and on to 180 mph.

But more clever and more impressive than any of that is the car's deportment — how it carries the dual challenges of performance and weight using a basket of tech including four-wheel steering, a quicker steering rack and what's called 6D suspension, where regular anti-roll bars go in the bin to be replaced by four dampers connected diagonally by 25 metres of pipework. Me neither, but let me explain the net effect...

On broken roads, in standard Comfort mode, all about is calm and surprisingly refined. Switch to Dynamic mode and the steering is meatier, the car noticeably more roll-resistant. But in SV mode the car drops 25mm, knows you want to play ball and — in the unlikely surrounds of the Portimão racetrack — this sportiest of Sports crosses the boundary from SUV to supercar, however unlikely that may sound.

I'm two laps or more in before I recalibrate all that's going on and remember *I'm driving a Range Rover*. What's happening beneath is delivering a driving experience that's borderline discombobulating — there's no body roll, no nose lift under hard acceleration and no sense of major weight transfer under hard, hard braking. I see beyond 200 kph on the main straight, but instead of a sense of impending doom, I'm just excited to barrel into corners, point the nose and get the throttle on at the first opportunity. It's a video game made real.

And then, should you wish (and as I did), you can simply drive off-track, even off-road, and glide serenely home as though nothing unruly had happened. Switch on the extraordinary Body and Soul seats (so extraordinary we'll come back to them for a future piece all their own) that use music producer-honed technology to vibrate and resonate along with your chosen music, and all is right with the world.

Like I say, officer, nothing to see here.

DARREN STYLES

QUICK STATS

POWER
626BHP
TORQUE
553LB/FT
0-60MPH
3.6 SECS
TOP SPEED
180MPH
RANGE
276G/KM
PRICE
£171,405
LANDROVER.CO.UK

Sharleen Spiteri

The Texas singer on doing exactly what she wants after 35 years in music, and the importance of following your instincts

JULIAN BROAD

What keeps you going and excited to make music after all these years?
I'm not scared of long pauses. They don't scare you. You're sometimes geared to think: 'I need to fill that space, and I need to be there, or I need to do this.' But I've got very good at going, "I'll go and do that, but I *won't* do that." And not being in that place when you're thinking, 'I want to make everybody like me.' Instead, being like 'I don't give a flying fuck!'

It's a liberating and free place to be in life, to get great enjoyment from what you've actually achieved and also what other people around you have achieved. Because even if something's not your bag, you know it's not all plain sailing, and there's an understanding of how hard it can be.

Your new album with Spooner Oldham, *The Muscle Shoals Sessions*, arrives on 29 March. What would you choose: a number one album or Arsenal winning the league?
A number one! Are you joking?! It's funny because my first football strip was actually West Ham, and coming to north London for the first time as a Celtic fan, it was [Celtic and Arsenal footballer] Charlie Nicholas who drew me to Arsenal. I'm just happy that we're doing so bloody good at the moment.

What's the weirdest place you've heard a Texas song played?
In a porn shop. I wasn't actually in the porn shop, but I was with a friend of mine in Soho, and he said, "Listen, you've got to see something." He pulled the curtain back from the door of this shop, and there was this photograph that Sean Ellis had taken of me for the Texas/Wu Tang sleeve when it's just my face. That was on the wall, and they were playing Texas in there. I thought that's the best thing, and I just loved it.

And what about the most unlikely Texas fan you've encountered?
Everyone that comes up to me and tells me they're a fan of my music. That takes a lot of guts as a fan of other people, that little bit of you that says, 'I hope they're not going to be horrible.' I always feel very thankful for what anybody says to me, when they tell me they're a fan. Oh, and Glastonbury last year! I was totally overwhelmed by that, because we were playing before Royal Blood and Arctic Monkeys, and there was a young crowd there for that. I thought they wouldn't know Texas records, but they did, and it was quite the moment for us.

I wanted to ask you about your enduring friendship with Wu-Tang's Method Man and RZA, which stems from when you performed with Method Man at the Brits back in 1998.
It's the kind of friendship that pops up every now and again. They played Glasgow last year, and I went on stage with them to perform our 'Say What You Want' duet, which was fantastic. We did a documentary a few years ago too, which was interesting because RZA was telling me about Method Man's lyrics and how he rapped about bottles of rum because he thought everyone Scottish was a pirate! I fell about laughing.

Every few years, something will come up, and we'll always run into each other. It's a nice friendship to have because it seems very unlikely, but I guess there's something similar in them coming from Staten Island and us coming from Glasgow. We met when we played with Public Enemy at Glasgow Barrowlands, and RZA said he just *got* the city. He said he understood the idea of being on the outside, because of where Staten Island is. He said you have to push yourself forward to get into the centre, and that was a great understanding of the places we come from. Glasgow is a place of shipbuilding too, and we shared this kind of working-class understanding. We're poles apart in backgrounds, but there's parallels within it, and that's what makes a lot of friendships.

What's the one bit of advice you'd give to someone who was just starting out in the music business?
I'd never presume to give anybody any advice, but the one thing I would say is, "If you've got a bad feeling about something, get the fuck out!" Because normally you're right. I've done things that somebody's talked me into and wondered why I did that. Make sure that you stand by it too, and you don't blame someone else for making that decision. NICK REILLY

SLINGSBY
PREMIUM GIN

NEW

Inspired by its spa town heritage and enjoyed around the world, Slingsby premium gin is crafted with pure spring water and real fruits to create the finest, award-winning British gin. With initial floral hints of violet, followed by notes of rich blackberry jam, Slingsby's Blackberry Gin is a bright, fruity and refreshing spirit.

Bottling the beautiful and restorative nature of Harrogate for you to experience with every sip.

SLINGSBY BRAMBLE

50ml Slingsby Blackberry Gin
25ml freshly squeezed lemon juice
12.5ml sugar syrup
12.5ml Crème de Mure

Add the Blackberry Gin, lemon juice and sugar syrup to a cocktail shaker and shake with ice until chilled. Strain into an old fashion rocks glass filled with crushed ice. Drizzle the Crème de Mure over the ice and garnish with a lemon wheel and fresh blackberries.

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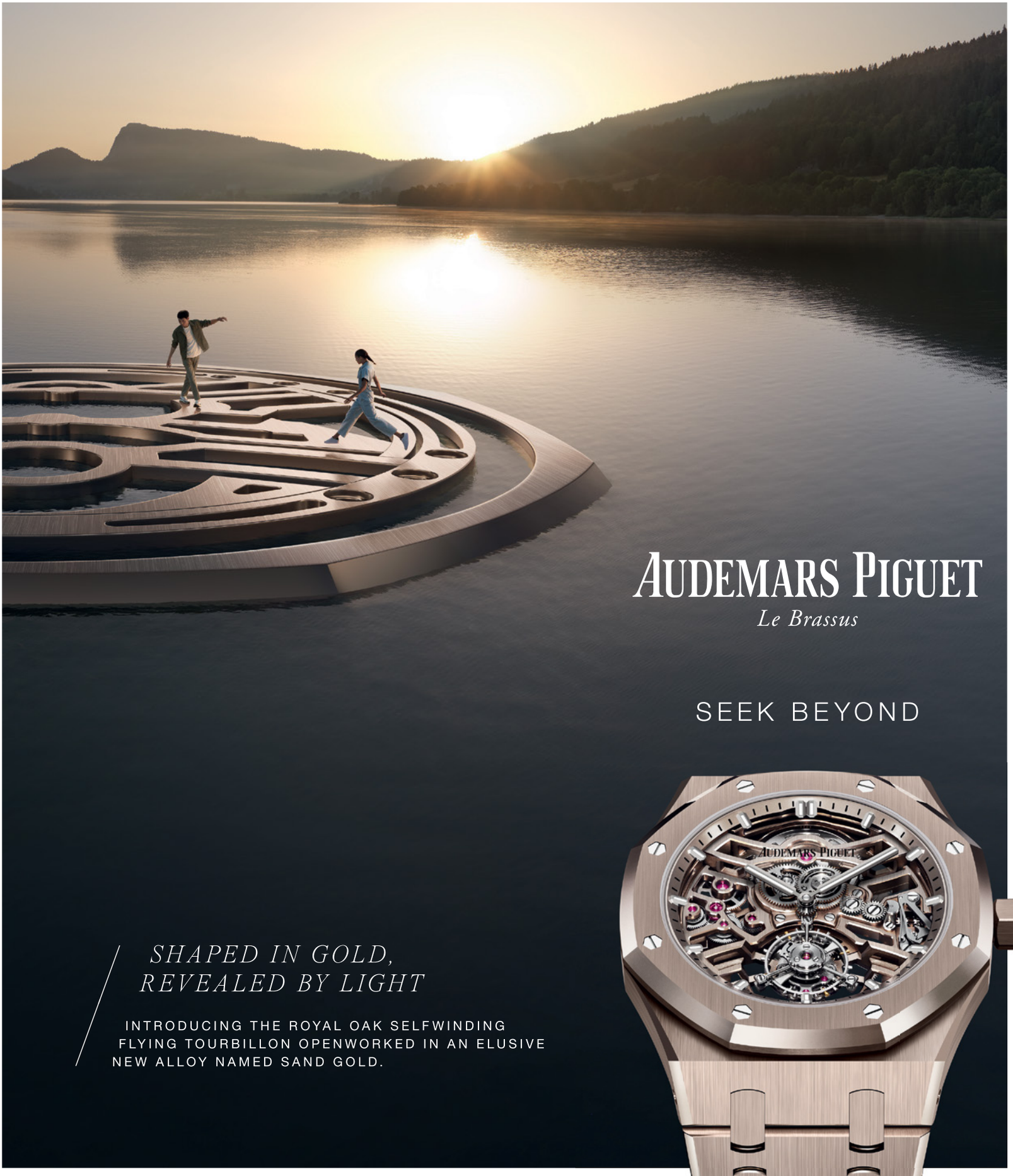

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